Critical Community Literacy:
Looking With Local Resistance

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Sarah Puett

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For those who participate

Abstract

This dissertation considers the relationship between literacy and activism in the public sphere. In the fall of 2016 I participated with a local racial justice organization where I took part in a series of public meetings. Focused on alternative means of public safety, the meetings were planned in response to local state violence—multiple incidents of police shooting and killing Black community members—as well as the broader interlocking systems of oppression which fail to protect people of color. This study exhibits how one decentralized organization helps establish *critical literacy* in a segregated urban area, better known for its progressive politics than its proclivity for lethal state violence. These meetings warrant a more complex, critical frame than community literacy scholarship currently provides. Drawing on both literacy and rhetorical studies, my analysis reveals the ways in which *literacy events* represent a type of *intervention*, and in this case, serve to disrupt mythic timelines. During the events, I contend, local Black organizers occupy and transgress the role of a *literacy sponsor* by calling on their (kn)own experiences with racial oppression. My analysis nuances the relationship between *literacy events* and *practices*, and in turn, I offer a series of dialectics for participant-observation in community literacy studies. I hope to establish precedent for speaking more plainly about racism and whiteness in community literacy scholarship, and to challenge the dominant notion that community literacy projects are categorically just. *Looking With Local Resistance* signals that if we participate as activists in communities outside the academy, we must do so as reflexively and sustainably as we do critically.

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Chapter One. Locating literacies: Crises, myths, and movement

To offer a sense of the landscape in the mid-twentieth century, writing scholars often point to cultural narratives of crisis. Two common points of reference are the 1955 publication "Why Johnny Can't Read" and UNESCO's 1962 campaign to eradicate illiteracy worldwide.[1] Both speak to a sense of fear and unease that dominated America's public consciousness under McCarthyism. As performances of literacy crisis, both illustrate the sweeping American disposition towards literacy, where the ability to read and write dominant English is the most valuable worldly asset. They also both rely on reductive, ethnocentric definitions of literacy and use that definition in service of an ideological agenda. Together they can explain, for better and for worse, how and why writing studies scholarship developed in the years that followed.

Literacy is often conceived of as the singular variable required for social advancement, one that unconditionally results in cognitive advantage (Ong, 1958; Havelock, 1963; Goody & Watt, 1968). Harvey Graff's landmark sociohistorical analysis was one of the first that tested and refuted such claims. Graff attempts to distinguish the perceived value of literacy education from literacy's actual impacts literacy has in people's lives (1979). By bringing empirical data in conversation with relevant cultural discourse from the 19th century, Graff locates the effects of literacy across race, class, and gender. He demonstrates that literacy did very little to instrument (or improve) social, political, or economic mobility and shows that illiteracy often had fewer negative impacts than many believed. As he highlights an overstatement of the role of literacy, Graff reveals the hegemonic function a distorted view can serve. He calls it *the Literacy Myth* –

[1] See also the 1963 and 1975 publications "Why Johnny Can't Write."

a distortion propagated by the dominant class, expressed across time and multiple domains, responsible for shaping both public perception and policy – and it persists in multiple and mutated ways still today.

By detailing the ill-conceived nature of literacy, Graff established a critical category for the developing field of literacy studies, as well as other disciplines. The *Encyclopedia of Language and Education* includes the following entry:

> Literacy Myth refers to the belief, articulated in educational, civic, religious, and other settings, contemporary and historical, that the acquisition of literacy is a necessary precursor to and invariably results in economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward social mobility. Despite many unsuccessful attempts to measure it, literacy in this formulation has been invested with immeasurable and indeed almost ineffable qualities, purportedly conferring on practitioners a predilection toward social order, an elevated moral sense, and a metaphorical "state of grace." Such presumptions have a venerable historical lineage and have been expressed, in different forms, from antiquity through the Renaissance and the Reformation, and again throughout the era of the Enlightenment, during which literacy was linked to progress, order, transformation, and control. Associated with these beliefs is the conviction that the benefits ascribed to literacy cannot be attained in other ways, nor can they be attributed to other factors, whether economic, political, cultural, or individual. Rather, literacy stands alone as the independent and critical variable. Taken together, these attitudes constitute what Graff has called "the Literacy Myth." Many researchers and commentators have adopted this usage.

While the myth has received broad purchase, it hasn't always been equitable or even accurate, according to Graff (2010). Reflecting thirty years later, he writes that the central and critical role of *myth* is often overlooked and misunderstood. A myth, he explains, is

"not synonymous with the fictive or the false… for a myth to gain acceptance, it must be grounded in at least some aspects of perceived reality and cannot explicitly contradict all ways of thinking or expectations" (p. 3). This is precisely what makes myth so difficult to locate and dismantle, as well as what qualifies *myth* as a mode of analysis and the literacy myth as a useful critical category.

A recognizable example of the literacy myth lies in theories of The Great Divide, which suggest a cognitive leap between "oral" and "literate." Scribner and Cole's (1981) work began as a rejection of this scholarship, which was prominent in psychological theory at the time. To test the theories, they conducted a seven-year study of literacy among the Vai in Liberia, where they observed engagement with Vai script, Arabic religious traditions and education, and more formal English education domains. Their findings across comparison groups indicated no significant evidence of higher-level forms of abstract thinking as being directly connected to literacy and instead suggested that literacy as inextricably connected to specific, situated activities in people's lives. These findings led Scribner and Cole to declare that the literacy impacts of literacy can only be understood when *practices* are identified and studied *in situ*. They defined *literacy practices* as, "a recurrent, goal-directed sequence of activities using a particular technology and a particular system of knowledge" (p. 236). This meant that if literacy could be understood, attempts to do so should be in inter-relation to the particular ways that literate actions are linked to broader culturally-developed practices and acts that have developed import over time. Scribner and Cole's practice account served as example.

Heath's (1983) work with three Carolinian communities heeded the call for situated, ethnographic work and illustrated the inextricable connection between language

and writing. Heath spent nine years observing and doing interviews in homes, classrooms, and workplaces, comparing the social-linguistic values and skills that were performed. Heath's observations of the culturally patterned ways people produce and share knowledge led to the construct of an empirical unit of analysis. A *literacy event* is "an occasion in which printed language is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretive processes and strategies" (p. 50). As a further rejection of the oral-literate divide, this unit of analysis became central to the study of situated literacy. Heath helped establish precedent and facility for studying literacy in context.

Heath's work also helped crystallize the field's need to pay attention to the ways in in which individuals and contexts are patterned. Her lack of explicit, critical attention to sociopolitical structures and ideologies alarmed some researchers. Her vague treatment of the "social and economic forces" that pattern language use, as well as the "mainstream" and "nonmainstream" categories she used, were considered cursory at best. Prendergast (2003) pointed out the avoidance of race and racial identity in Heath's final account and how important race was to the story Heath did *not* tell. Stuckey (1991) noted Heath's lack of awareness that ideology oppresses participants, research, and researchers, and her assumption that ethnographic data alone would somehow lead to more justice in the world. Cintron (1993) also noted Heath's eschewal of identity and ideology in crafting her account. In short, Heath's work was valuable and productive, and there was a recognizable need to establish an agenda for the field.

Literacy scholarship needed a bold heuristic that could draw out the relationships and functions of power. Street (1985) proposed the New Literacy Studies (NLS) based on two opposing theoretical models. In the autonomous model, literacy is neutral, technical,

and used the same way in multiple settings. The ideological model, by contrast, acknowledged the weakness of the autonomous model, subsumed its definitions of literacy, and set them within structures of power. The ideological model would make way for richer analysis of the relationship between literacy and power, particularly when aided by fieldwork. Street maintained that ethnographic methods are most useful for studying literacy, so long as the ideology of the research/er is considered at length and opened up to scrutiny. For clarity, Street points out that the term ideology has two different connotations in current research: as an assertion of identity and as a mediational means for resistance against oppression. Both emphasize that power is entrenched in the individual lives and in collective literacy practices.

The centrality of power was animated by Deb Brandt's work on *literacy sponsorship*. This concept seemed to offer an actionable way to study the ideological model, as it teases out the arrangements of power in the arrangements of literacies. Brandt (1998) defines a *literacy sponsor* as: "any agent, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way." Brandt drew on 100 interviews with "ordinary" Americans to demonstrate the concept and explains its role is to aid in understanding human relationships, as well as the impact of larger systems and ideologies at literacy learning sites. Using individual cases of "daily living" as example, Brandt showed how literacy sponsors arrange systems of power and argued that the sheer volume of literacy-related activity warrants such a concept. As a central concept for the field, literacy sponsorship helped produce a wealth of meaningful research.[2]

[2] See Duffy, Christoph, & Goldblatt (2014).

By challenging the monolithic definition of literacy, Graff, Scribner and Cole, Street, and Heath shifted, pluralized, and sharpened the object of study and offered conceptual groundwork for a wealth of new scholarship. Just as the social turn took hold in the broader field of Rhetoric and Composition, the New Literacy Studies emerged with promising critical, theoretical, and methodological foundations. The prevailing view of literacy scholarship at the turn of the century nicely summarized by Barton and Hamilton (2000):

- Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts.
- There are different literacies associated with different domains of life.
- Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies are more dominant, visible and influential than others.
- Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices.
- Literacy is historically situated.
- Literacy practices change and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making.

As the field progressed conceptually and methodologically, literacy scholars moved outside schooled setting and into other, local, community-based settings. Some of this scholarship focused on "everyday" or "ordinary" relationships to literacy, which was meant to fracture the commonly accepted definition and location literacy practices. Moss' (1994) study of literacy in African American churches, for example, established reason for the field to move into alternative institutions. Farr and Guerra's (1995) work with Mexicano immigrants revealed the complexity of public and private domains, particularly

for "culturally non-mainstream" populations with restricted access to formal academic settings. In 1986, Linda Flower established a what she conceived as a bridge between the academy and the local community in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The Community Literacy Center (CLC) was intended to mediate the divides and differences of community members, city officials, and university representatives. Based on the work of the CLC, Peck, Flower, and Higgins (1995) carved out the subfield of community literacy scholarship and declared social change its first priority.

This declaration, as well as the field's move towards studying community-based literacies, carried with it an assumption of progressivism (this, despite the fact that the language used to describe people, projects, and environments now seems wildly problematic). Gee (1999) was one of the first to question the field's fixation with on the local and the social. He questioned how new capitalism was conveniently aided by this social, context-based approach, and in the process, offered a productive visualization: "The fact is that words give meaning to contexts just as surely as contexts give meaning to words. Words and contexts are two mirrors facing each other, infinitely and simultaneously reflecting each other" (p. 8). As problematic as it is productive, the tension that Gee identified points to a broad paradox of postmodern logic.[3]

Brandt and Clinton (2002) astutely distilled the tensions that Gee recognized as "the limits of the local." They pointed out that preoccupation with local context would bind understandings, forms, and meanings of literacy. Drawing on LaTour, Brandt and Clinton assigned literacy a "thing status" as they suggested that the focus on local activity occludes non-present phenomena. The authors seem to focus on movement *into* local

[3] See Faigley (1992).

contexts when they describe the transcontextual nature of literacy: "Seemingly local appropriations of literacy may in fact be culminations of literate designs originating elsewhere" (p. 238). To better locate these designs, and delocalize literacy, Brandt and Clinton proposed the analytical construct "literacy in action" as replacement for the literacy event. Acknowledging literacy as an active constitution of the social—as an *actant*—Brandt and Clinton argued, would allow literacy scholars to productively examine broader historical and material designs and arrangements without succumbing to the autonomous model.

Royster (2000) makes a similar case for literacy as action, specifically, sociopolitical action. Like Freire, she acknowledges that reading the social and political landscape is a precursor to any rhetorical competence one might perform. Using Burke's concepts of identification, consubstantiation, and terministic screens as examples, Royster explains each rhetorical move as an act of literacy (p. 55). In doing so, Royster reframes literate acts as observable, sociopolitical performances, analysis of which shed a great deal of light on systems of power. Royster's rewrites the history of African American women's literacy not only as a process of learning to read and write, but as a critical creation of agency and authority. By using literacy as a transformative tool the women "created discursively 'new' worlds, worlds that they instantiate through language, worlds that permit them a place to exist" (p. 64). Royster created her own unique for analysis that allowed her to build a full picture of what African American women faced, how they empowered themselves, resisted domination, and proactively re-wrote the world. Royster not only illustrates the value of an inductive approach to data analysis, her work serves as re-presentation of literacy as rhetorical.

Duffy (2007) also made productive use of the literacy as political and rhetorical. Like Royster, Duffy outlines a rhetorical conception of literacy, where reading and writing are always learned under the influence rhetorics. In his view, rhetorics are "the ways of using language and other symbols by institutions, groups, or individuals for the purpose of shaping conceptions of reality" (p. 15). Duffy's work with a Hmong community demonstrates how a connection of ethnographic, historical, and theoretical perspectives creates the possibility—and I dare say opportunity—to analyze literacy in a more politically-motivated way. In Duffy's account, rhetorics of literacy attend to: "the ways in which reading and writing can be used to define, control, and circumscribe, but also the ways in which human beings can use written language to turn aside, re-create, and re-imagine" (p. 18). Drawing on his rich fieldwork experience, Duffy argues that researchers are responsible for connecting "the diamond-sharp observations of ethnographic studies to the larger, structural, systemic, and global forces that shape local contexts" (p. 10). Together Duffy and Royster illustrate how local acts of literacy rhetorically interact or engage a broader public sphere.[4]

The public sphere appears less in literacy studies than it does in rhetorical studies. Habermas conceived of the public sphere as a discursive mediation space where private citizens rationally discuss matters of the State (1989). Fraser (1992) identified the exclusion of gender and class in Habermas' conception, rejected the idea that difference can or should be bracketed for participation, and suggested that "actually existing" democracy could rehabilitate the concept of the public sphere. In doing so she introduced

[4] It's worth noting that in 1995, the internet became public. In short order, composition scholars shifted towards public writing (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Weisser, 2002; Mathieu, 2005). In literacy and rhetorical studies, the notion of publics along with multiple conceptions of a public sphere, seem to have afforded researchers a necessary theoretical inference.

the concept of *subaltern counterpublics*, made up of marginalized actors denied access to systems of power. Fraser clarifies an important counterpublic quality: "they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment [and] they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed towards wider publics. It is precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides" (p. 68). These parallel discursive arenas, where counterdiscourses form and circulate as oppositional strategies, were nuanced spatially and temporally in the years that followed (Warner, 2002; Squires, 2002; Asen & Brouwer, 2001). Since then, the public sphere and counterpublics have become organizing concepts in the broad field of rhetorical study, particularly in studies of resistance where counterdiscourses and oppositional strategies are central to the research focus.

Flower (2008) makes productive use of the public sphere as a conception of shared space of social realities. Like Royster and Duffy, she examines literacy as critical action and suggests that scholars give more attention to agentic performances that shape the public sphere. She suggests that in vivo rhetorical cats are important to consider: "Exchanging the shop-worn schema of the autonomous individual for one that dramatizes the play of discourse and ideology may end up blinding us to the presence of actual acts of rhetorical agency *within* a constraining and contingent world" (p. 196). In an interesting portion of her analysis, Flower illustrates how a think tank discussion at the CLC *acts* like a *counterpublic.* In turn she cites Fraser, Warner, and Cintron and attempts to tease out some of the complexity of counterpublics relative to identity politics. But Flower does not engage closely with Fraser's definition of a counterpublic; to do so would require identification of the defining dialectic (spaces of *withdrawal and*

regroupment and as bases and training grounds for *agitational activities* directed towards *wider publics*). Considering the intentionality involved in withdrawing, regrouping, agitating, and directing may or may not disqualify the CLC as counterpublic, but nonetheless, this isn't Flower's goal. Rather, the goal is to document her own definition of community literacy: "an intercultural dialogue *with others* on issues that *they* identify as sites of struggle" (p. 19, emphasis in original). Here it's pertinent to remember a few key points.

Flower's established the CLC—which is oft referenced as the model for community engaged literacy work—at an old house in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1986. Intended to bridge divides between community members, city officials, and university representatives, Flower hoped the CLC would help people move beyond recognition of difference and toward cultivation. It was designed to *mediate space* between the academy and the community, as a site for intercultural engagement between, what I would argue are two very broadly defined categories. So not only did Flower define the type of community literacy she aimed to document, she did so in the very space she created for it—which are demonstrable exercises of institutional power and control. It seems to me that the CLC would condition (if not exclude) participants as well as their speech acts, perhaps eschewing the possibilities for radical political engagement. My issue isn't so much with what the CLC is than what it is *not*. Based on the outlined institutional arrangement, the CLC isn't exactly *radical*—at least not in the underground, grassroots, institution-rejecting sense of the word. Flower might have chosen to say, to go back to her example, that the think tank *acted* like a counterpublic, rather than, perhaps, *being* one.

This institutional tension compels me, as does the nebulous priority of social change that community literacy scholarship aims to achieve. The vague, careful, dominant ways of academic language do not compel me, however. It seems that the field moved satisfiable far away from capital-L definitions of literacy, but perhaps not far enough from the academic institutional setting. Where are rhetors engaging in their own spaces, on their own terms, postured towards a wider public? What might the consideration of spaces like these teach us about literacy, rhetoric, communities, or publics? What do we stand to learn spaces and participants trying to affect social change or compel social movement(s)? How might the features or qualities of literacy (e.g. "everyday" or as "counterpublic-like") be unique in sites like these? Central to each of these questions are more questions about power. Those of us interested in civic participation with alternative institutions and with broader public discussion of critical literacy should seek answers, resist the shelter of the academy.

Chapter overview

Chapter two surveys methodological tensions involved in ethnographic research and traces some recognizable, problematic binaries in literacy and rhetorical scholarship. The chapter does not represent a comprehensive view, nor is it an attempt to "solve" the issues discussed. Influenced by Royster's description of "disciplinary landscape" and Hawhee's "transdisciplinarity" this chapter represents a sustained engagement with methodological texts that shaped me as a literacy studies scholar and researcher. At the end of chapter two I outline my research questions and describe my participant-observation with a local activist organization.

Chapter three presents the data collected during participant observation. Drawing on fieldnotes, artifacts, conversations I was involved in throughout this project, this chapter speaks directly my research questions but an atypical way. Overall this chapter performs as an ethnographic account, and therefore it will not read like a neatly-controlled academic text. Instead, it's meant to reflect the messiness of participation, of ethnographic methods, and of critical community literacy.

Chapter four serves as a central analysis chapter. Overall my analysis is framed by the theoretical construct of *the literacy event*, as a central unit of analysis that allows for empirical examination of a situated reading, writing, and speaking occasion. To help make sense of the occasions in this study, my analysis also relies on the concepts of *literacy practices*, *literacy sponsorship*, and to a lesser degree, conceptions of the public/counterpublic spheres and ancient Greek *kairos*.

Chapter five communicates the findings of this study to a series of different audiences: community literacy scholars, compositionists, and rhetoricians interested in critical-participatory field methods.

Chapter Two. Methodological landscapes: Surveying ethnographic dualisms

Under the broad category of qualitative research, ethnographic methods have long been employed in the social sciences. As a genre and a methodological approach, across time and discipline, ethnography casts epistemological points of departure in relief. Researchers who make use of ethnographic methods are set within a larger timeline of colonialism, where exoticization and othering of early anthropological study went relatively unquestioned. By the mid twentieth century, ethnographic research flourished as a rejection of positivism. Literacy researchers pursued and engaged ethnographic methods almost comprehensively as the field moved away from investigating literacy as an individual, cognitive, neutral, autonomous possession acquired in school. This methodological shift resulted in as many consequences as it did affordances.

Ethnographic methods took strong hold in the 1980s as part of a social turn in Rhetoric-Composition. As critical scholarship challenged theories of The Great Divide, an interest in more socially situated accounts of literacy. many of which explicitly labeled their work ethnography if not "ethnographic" in nature. Szwed (1981) argued that in-depth observation and artifact collection uniquely allow access to what literacy is and what it does in people's lives, amounting to a more nuanced view than what reductive theories or models might provide. Staying close to the contexts of real people would create an inventory from which researchers could generalize, which Szwed believed was

prudent for the field. Scribner and Cole (1981) stand out as one of the earliest investigations of literacy outside of a schooled setting. Their "practice account" design prompted a trend towards studying situated literacy within a given community. Heath's (1983) work with three communities in the Carolinas also provided an early ethnographic example which generated a unit of analysis that is now central to the understanding of writing as a social practice. Together Szwed, Scribner and Cole, Heath (along with the previously discussed work of Brian Street) established ethnography as the principal method for literacy studies.

Organized under this new focus, and with new conceptual tools, scholars embraced the ethnographic enterprise. Fracturing the primary domain of interest seemed to allow for a richer understanding of literacy but also of the nuance and complexity in the real lives of people. The turn away from heuristics and models as methods, replaced by more authentic accounts of lived experience seemed overdue but welcome. Fishman's (1991) influential work, for example, gave breath to the lives and voices of an Amish community and allowed her to nuance the social embeddedness of literacy. The complexity of literacy practices described in her ethnographic account gave rise to new conversations about writing instruction and classroom community development. Fishman management of the inherent and emergent complexity of ethnographic methods allowed her to make a positive contribution to the field. Her findings extended the field's knowledge in varied and undeniable ways. It's worth noting that Fishman was an "outsider" to the Amish community and the ways of Amish life. Heath did not claim to understand the *whole* of Amish culture, nor did she claim to write the *only* or *most true* story; she didn't claim to be an insider or to aim to become one necessarily. Did her

intentions matter? Fishman's work is one of many that invokes a series of relevant binaries: genre/method, self/other, insider/outsider, mainstream/nonmainstream, individual/collective, local/global.

Stuckey (1991) alludes to these problematic dynamics as she critiques ethnographic studies of literacy, calling attention to the dogmatic, westernized ideologies that often pervade research design and content. Stuckey is as intolerant of oppressive systems as she is impatient with research and researchers who are not actively, energetically, and unapologetically working towards justice. For Stuckey, Scribner and Cole's work is a preservation of the status-quo, a retreat towards insularity. She believed the Vai were taxonomized, unrepresented, and understood according only to Scribner and Cole's limited understandings of literacy. From Stuckey's perspective, Heath's work is also inadequate: "A ten-year observation of chronic disparity and bias produces less a call for change in a self-satisfied, mainstream society than a mandate for despairing people to change their language ways" (p. 41). Stuckey calls into question the entire value system that would lead Szwed to call for an inventory of situated accounts of literacy; such logic would seem to believe that "more knowledge of more literacies will yield greater social (and economic?) tolerance" (p. 48). Stuckey's central claim is that literacy is ideological, can be weaponized, and has by American government and literacy researchers, and is described as violent. Ethnography of literacy, then, is yet another exercise in social oppression.

Cintron (1993) chose to see these binaries as unexplored territory – areas to "crack open" the work of writing researchers for rhetorical and political analysis. He identifies several additional falsehoods and problematics of ethnographic accounts, such

as a veil of certainty, an isolation or snapshot of time, a collective voice, as well as the promise of progress and ever-improvement in methodologies. Overall, Cintron's point is that researchers create boundaries for themselves and stay inside of them. Research questions, for example, where are researchers design their own knowledge and their own ignorance (p. 391). Cintron optimizes Heath's (1983) work as his central site of critique, not because he finds it inadequate or without value, but as an illustration of the rhetorical work that goes into the research design and the composition of ethnographic accounts. In reading Heath's work this way, Cintron argues that researchers have the opportunity to be more dynamic in their approach to ethnography, in such a way that unveils hidden thinking or ideologies that might otherwise be kept at bay. He acknowledges the social turn in writing studies, and like Szwed, argues that qualitative study provides an opportunity to learn about the process of writing research and cultures it explores. In this way, it's possible to "critique the social order" of research and of society by using ethnographic methods.

Cintron and Stuckey provide a number of important points about the payoffs and pitfalls of any ethnological endeavor. With etymological roots in ancient Greece and epistemological roots in anthropology, ethnography is marked by antithesis. Imperialism and colonization, the original sins, are inexorable in many ways. This history followed ethnographies and ethnographers into contemporary American settings, where binaries continued to emerge. Fine (1994) points out a few: "urban and rural, poverty-stricken and working class, white and of color American" (p. 75). The interlocking systems of oppression in the United States created occasion for new conversations

Clifford and Marcus' landmark collection (1986) captures the tensions involved reading and writing a culture—seeing, hearing, feeling, being, knowing, and having culture. One by one the essays reveal the contextual, rhetorical, institutional, political, and historical arrangements in and functions of ethnographic works. They show how ethnographies, as a form of cultural production represent economies of truth. Clifford and Marcus perfectly captured spatial-temporal arrangements of power when they wrote: "Cultures don't sit still for their portrait." Just as any written genre contends with and wrestles over the truth, so too does ethnography. Researchers like Michelle Fine have moved academic conversation towards nuance and hybridity, where there's now a recognizable fracture between researcher responsibility and vulnerability.

Reflexivity is broadly conceived of as a critical disposition a scholar takes towards their own writing, attitudes, and ways of knowing. *Positionality* often refers to radical self-reflection that's included in the final ethnographic account as a way for the researcher to be theoretically, ethically, and rhetorically forthcoming. For many researchers, writing one's positionality is more than just accounting for bias, it's a required step toward critical inquiry. While a careful reader might be able to observe a researcher's implicit positioning, positionality is an explicit attempt to make the researcher's gaze part of the story. Reflexivity and positionality shows up in ethnographic research in a variety of ways, a confessional paragraph, a depoliticized discussion of limitations, or even as marginalia. Wolf (1992) stands out as an early adopter of critical-reflexive annotations, which she positions alongside three different accounts written using the same "data" or experiences. In Wolf's view, researchers have to find a way to get to work—to *do* the work: "[She] listens to as many voices as she can and then

chooses among them when she passes their opinions on to members of another culture. The choice is not arbitrary, but then neither is the testimony…" (p. 11).

Like Wolf, Fine (1994) considers the ways in which researchers "braid critical and contextual struggle" into the texts they create. Drawing on Hall's notion of the self, which is fluid and constituted by contrasting against the other, Fine identifies the *hyphen* as the connector/disconnector in the self/other pairing. These binaries leads to an unexamined center, a space in between, made up of valuable data on social relations. Fine argues in favor of working the hyphen for all it's worth. In doing so, she identifies two disparate ethnographic dispositions: speaking *with* and speaking *for*. In some cases, ethnographies illustrate and foreground the lived experiences (typically their actual language) as single-most visible feature in the text. Ethnographic methods can create the conditions for this kind of work, but in the end it is the author's choice about how they re-present and disposition themselves. Behar (1996) showed how some authors are subjective to a fault, falling into an endless cycle of continuously qualifying themselves or trying so hard to privilege the voices of others that they forget they have a voice and experiences all their own.

Few researchers in Writing Studies subscribe to the positivist illusion that an ethnographer is an objective, research instrument used to observe anything, let alone something as abstract as *culture*. Selecting ethnographic methods creates more work for researchers, and yet, many still do. Many researchers refer to change (personal, social, political, academic, and otherwise) as a driving force behind their choice of ethnographic methods. For many, the methods themselves and/or the genre of ethnography are chosen to buttress some kind of recovery, revival, or re-presentation of communities that have

been underrepresented, marginalized, or oppressed. Spradley's (1970) account of urban nomads living in Seattle in the late 1960s is a common example. He focuses primarily on Skid Road, which was the term used to describe where logs were "skidded to the sawmill" (p. 8). Later it would be altered to Skid Row, but both designate areas of *visible* impoverishment. Spradley describes the group of men in his study in the following terms: "They are seen as people who fail abysmally, are dependent on society, lack self-control, drink too much, are unpredictable, and often end up in jail for their criminal behavior" (p. 66). His account illustrates a group of people who have been relegated to the underbelly of the city, and eventually to State-run sites of containment. This group of men's the counter-cultural quality, Spradley writes, is perceived but is not real in terms of physical distance; these men live amongst city dwellers. However, they often go on to be incarcerated in many cases, which means their diversity does amount to displacement as a practice of the state.

Spradley asks if it's possible to create a system that doesn't punish diverse subcultures and notes that "illegal" behavior—an elected dismissal of middle class norms and values—proves that we do not have such a system as of yet. The country's prison system, alongside other institutions, continue to reinforce the cycle of incarceration and imprisonment. Spradley makes note of anthropologist's desire to study the *exotic*. He responds to it by clarifying that his audience is not the urban nomads, rather it's for those who are *not* affected by the same cultural constraints as these men and can serve to eliminate those forces. In other words, the nomads are rejected culturally, so his inside-view account is meant to disrupt the narrative of those who seek to constrain these "menaces to society" either through judgement or literal containment. He argues that

ethnographers have a responsibility to write from the insider perspective of anyone whom dominant society might consider an *outsider*. Such a perspective can only be achieved through extended participation, or, what some call, "deep hanging out."

Like Spradley, Heller's (1997) work takes place in a diverse, poverty-stricken part of an urban sprawl, made more controversial by its place in history. Hers is situated in The Tenderloin of San Francisco in the late 1980s, where a writer's workshops were established as a space for people in the neighborhood to be heard, and to foster opportunities not otherwise offered to them by society. She spent three years with a group of women who, she writes, nearly always feel invisible. Despite her initial concerns that she would be rejected by the "have-nots" and "know-nots," because she was a "haver" and a "knower," the women embraced Heller's presence. They were eager to talk to her, and often wanted to make very sure the nature of their conversations was captured. Heller was an outsider who it seems very quickly became an insider if not a trusted companion. Only through this trusted relationship, her sustained and careful observation, diligent recording and transcription, and thoughtful, reflexive representation could Heller have achieved the candor she does in her account. With her work, Heller hoped to achieve a personal and complex view of how critical literacy operates in the field and in the researcher, rather than in theory. Heller hinges her entire work on this fact and submits that her ethnography is a cultural performance with more to offer than narrative or criticism. It's justice work.

Royster (2000) also argues on behalf of critical ethnography—especially that which locates and re-presents voices of an unseen culture—as exampled by her ethnohistorical account of African American women's writing from the 19th century.

Royster accounts for the social, political, and cultural logics that both stripped (and continuously ignored) African American women of their agentic power and influence. Focusing on the essay genre of these women, particularly the use of the essay genre, as a means by which they articulated sociopolitical thought and action. She offers rich examples of defending, celebrating, and advocating for themselves and the issues relevant to their life and livelihood in society. Royster's tracing of essayistic examples restores a sense of rhetorical prowess was not forgotten but seized in the whitewashing of history. Shifting the historical view of these practices allows for a wider understanding of meaning-making and a clearer vision of the past. Royster's account restores more than just agency as it shows how African American women's rhetorical capabilities were as abundant as they were rich. Thus, Royster triangulated amongst ethnographic methods, combining practices from rhetorical, feminist, and literacy studies to write her work. She then rewrote history in a more inclusive, accurate way, one that re-inscribes an oppressively gendered and raced population back into the cultural history and memory. Royster says a commitment to social responsibility, nay, *justice* is key for ethnographers.

Spradley, Heller, and Royster all represent culture in material, spatial, and (em)bodied ways. Each of the authors locate an *injustice* that manifests as a countercultural narrative about the humanity of those they write about. In turn, each of these authors illustrate how injustice is produced and perpetuated by State practices and systems of violence. They show how injustices are re-inscribed through systems of oppression, as well as how race, class, gendered privilege manifest in law. Re-presenting the lived experiences of these individuals, then, becomes an act of resistance against dominant patterns and logics. Each in their own way, Spradley, Heller, and Royster show

that ethnographic accounts can serve to (re)position un-heard or mis-heard voices of un-seen or misrepresented populations, compelling their audience to see with new eyes. Moreover, each hope to transgress narratives of difference and seek liberation. They re-present life in hopes of creating and affecting some kind of change—be it their own, dominant culture, or the field. Spradley's account seems unique in the sense that he positioned himself towards the broader public sphere, asking everyone to change their ways of seeing rather than arguing on behalf of the ethnography as genre or method. Researchers Heller and Royster have an undeniable and beneficial impact in the fields of literacy and rhetorical studies. Each of these women illustrate how literacy is integral to ways of being and knowing as they show that histories can—and should—be re-written.

More recently, critical-rhetorical fieldwork and participatory methods are in resurgence. Pezzullo (2007) offers an early example of critical-rhetorical fieldwork performed by an embodied approach to the grassroots struggle for environmental justice. Pezzullo uses a modified ethnographic approach, expertly weaving participant-observation, interviews, and her own analysis of publicly available media. In considering the negative effects of tourism, she considers a number of issues related to fieldwork more broadly, such as looking-versus-seeing, exoticization of the other, and generally offensive exploitation. These concerns did not stupid her from embarking on the "toxic tour" though, she considers it a worthwhile educational experience, both democratizing and politically progressive. In bearing witness to and participating in this tourism, Pezzullo argues that these noncommercial tours "serve as embodied rhetorics of resistance aimed at mobilizing public sentiment" (p. 3). She also suggests that

participation is key to understanding the shared social problem of toxic disasters, not only for citizens, but for researchers.

Chávez's (2013) work on queer and immigrant coalitions reveals the viability of field methods to the study of social movements. She points out that a great deal of the work of social movements are not part of public discourse or behavior. By focusing on the "inner workings" of enclaves, Chávez argues that social movement scholarship can be made richer and broader. Drawing on observations and interviews, Chávez shows how activists in two groups interpret and respond to public rhetoric in unique ways, creating a complex rationale for their coalition as part of a larger movement. This shows how external rhetoric helps create and sustain collective action between groups and allows Chávez to examine "how activists understand mediated, political, and legal rhetoric about queer and migrant subjects" (p. 370). Asen (2015) cites Chávez's work as an example of what rhetorical studies stands to learn from fieldwork. He argues that field methods are a valuable complement to traditional textual analysis, allowing researchers to properly appreciate the complexity and variety of relations among multiple publics and counterpublics. The use of field methods, Asen submits, offer alternative perspectives on public discourse, especially when participation is constrained, or the public discourse is not yet (or ever) recorded.

This resurgence in rhetorical fieldwork will require researchers to adjust to the current political climate and to acknowledge some of the dualisms surveyed here. As proponents of this methodological shift, Pezzullo, Chávez, and Asen suggest that rhetoricians be braver, and stop considering fieldwork experimental. Two recent,

provocative collections would suggest that the field is, in fact, considering the idea.[5] In my view, this new interest and the new conversations that follow, can be positive; rhetoricians have too long written and observed from a problematic distance. But it's critical to recognize that this turn brings with it all the old problems of extraction, exploitation, othering, exoticizing, fetishizing, the gaze, the white savior complex, and the written account as a rhetoric that orders society. There are also new problems to consider, such as modern state surveillance and the gatekeeping mechanisms of contemporary universities. Critical field methods can help scholars understand complex social spheres and movements, particularly by focusing on the organizing work that happens among people and among groups with sometimes dissimilar goals. The field of rhetoric stands to learn a great deal from the resurgence of interest in fieldwork so long as it acknowledges the unlimited discretion of the researcher and acknowledges the method's fraught history in forging its richer future.

Approach

As is common in studies where researchers employ ethnographic methods, the scope and focus of the project shifted over time (Spradley, 1980; Maybin, 2000; Wolfinger, 2013). Some local events prompted my interest in the organization referenced here (namely, police shooting black community members) while others, such as the 2016 Presidential election, influenced all of us, our work, and our relationships. The major data included here—which do not reflect the full scope of my involvement with the organization, nor do they represent the breadth of their work—were public events at a registered non-profit

[5] See Middleton, Hess, Endres, & Senda-Cook (2015) and McKinnon, Asen, Chavez, & Howard (2016).

organization in Minnesota, referred to here as Twin Cities Organizing (TCO). After prolonged discussions with multiple organizers, as well as colleagues, mentors, and an institutional review board, naming the organization in this research-oriented, niche academic text was up to me (Lillis, 2008). Frankly, TCO is a dynamic social organization whose work, and individual workers are far more complex than I could ever do justice. I have not gone to great lengths to de-identify the organization because any risk that might be associated with identification is negligible, which was confirmed first with organizers and secondarily by my institution, hope that any praise will not be withheld.

Site background

TCO is a grassroots racial justice organization that is exclusively and deliberately Black-led. Located in a segregated urban area, the organization is classified as a 501(c)(4) which designates it as a non-profit that operates "exclusively to promote social welfare" (IRS, 2016). The group is well funded by a sustainable line of grant funds, as well as their member-base. During public meetings (which draw anywhere from 30-100) organizers, members, and attending non-members discuss what needs to be done. Meetings are planned and led by black organizers employed by TCO—and often centralize the voices of locals who identify as people of color—while a large portion of members and meeting attendees identify as white allies. TCO is not a single-issue organization, so the campaigns discussed during public meetings center around broad social issues—such as worker's rights, quality public education, environmental justice, and police accountability—and they consistently work with other local organizations seeking justice

(religious, political, or otherwise). TCO's work is broad, diverse, intersectional, and powerful; their social-political leverage is well-documented by local media.

Research questions

- What happens at local activist sites that qualifies as a literacy event and what is its function? What features characterize these events?
    - How does the theoretical construct of the literacy event help us understand what's going on? What does this site tell us about how we might nuance the theoretical construct of the literacy event?
    - How do ethnographic research methods afford and constrain?

Data sources and collection

The data in this study are series of events that took place at a racial justice organization (TCO) in fall 2016 and winter 2017. Participant observation was the standard means of data collection (Spradley, 1980). I became acquainted with some of TCO's organizers and members upon moving to the area in 2013. After a local news story involving TCO went viral in 2014, I began following the organization on social media. Over the next year or so I became acquainted with a number of local organizers as a result of shared interests and participation at local events (activist and otherwise). By 2016 I strongly supported the work of TCO as an active, sustaining member. Participant-observation, in theory, allowed me to continue this authentic involvement with the organization as a "complete-member-researcher" (Adler & Adler, 1994). I participated as a white member of the local community, eager to contribute to the work of a black-led racial justice

organization that was building local power and creating important change. I also experienced events as a white woman, a student of writing studies, and a rhetorician—some of which caused cognitive dissonance throughout the project. In some cases, I tried to "solve" the dissonance by talking through it with an organizer or a friend. In others, I tried to be reflexive and committed to reading and writing about the experience.

As a **participant-observer**, I often hand-wrote fieldnotes in medium sized notebook or typed briefly on my cell phone, and then typed more extensive fieldnotes on my laptop afterwards (Sanjek, 1990; Wolfinger, 2002). As one of many local community members in the room, who cared deeply about what was at stake in the meetings, I was not the only person taking notes. If I did not record notes, it was because it felt appropriate to participate, observe, listen, watch, or experience the events without a pencil in hand. During participant-observation at TCO I often talked with organizers and other participants, regularly received email from the organization, followed their social media accounts, and stayed on top of local news. **Fieldnotes**: Handwritten fieldnotes were taken during events to make note of what was happening. I tried to document who was doing what, how, and, where applicable, verbal reason-giving. Shortly thereafter I used my notes to compose alternative versions of my fieldnotes, some of which recount events, document context, make connections, question my own methods, and interpretations (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2011). My fieldnotes from these events, along with the writing produced or referenced during the events, are the primary data sat I used to craft this academic text (Lillis, 2008). I also drew on writing from before and after these events, both my own and that of others, because they illustrate context or changes to my

positionality. These are used primarily in chapter three to illustrate the site, the social context, and changes in my own relationship to this work. I've cited the work of others where possible. **Artifacts**: Relevant artifacts were collected or documented where possible. I took pictures, including one of graphic/text produced during a meeting, and received others via email from organizers. I also searched the internet for some public artifacts (historical documents, news stories, audio files, etc.) that were referenced during events. I did this for my own understanding, and because it illuminates context and the community. I did not collect or document any private artifacts referenced during conversation, such as posts on social media, journal entries, etc. (Hodder, 1994). **Conversations**: I did not conduct structured or formal interviews, but I engaged in conversation with organizers and other meeting participants, some of which were planned ahead of time (but not structured) while others were incidental encounters (Pinsky, 2015). These conversations were often unprompted by me, and thereby unstructured, pertained to experiences related to the organization's cause. I did not audio-record any conversations during the course of this project.

Interchapter commentary

Many studies of literacy consider instances, events, practices, and habits of local communities, which suggests "looking at" community literacy. The project of "looking with" arrived as a result of social and political circumstances which urged me to pursue alternative forms of research. Previously I was guided by the narrow conceptions of how past scholars have treated literacy crises and myths, as well as the most useful units of analyses. In the face of both local and national racial tension, I had to find ways to

contend with both the country's collective failure to discuss race and my own lack of participation in such conversations gave rise to my project. I mention this to reinforce what I've previously alluded to about the next chapter.

Chapter three is not a neatly or tightly controlled academic text and should not be read with that expectation. As it represents my emotional discomfort and social anxiety, the chapter raises more questions rather than offering any conclusive answers. It is an exhibit of me grappling with whiteness, trying to figure out how to divest my privilege, trying to make sense of my identity across multiple public spheres, and trying to leverage my positionality for justice in each of these domains. I wanted to participate critically, ethically, and justly with a community outside the academy, which is not as easy as it may seem. Thus, the proceeding chapter describes my learning process—which in many ways is the beating heart of this project.

Chapter Three. Learning to look

I couldn't figure out what to do.

I pulled off my sunglasses and looked up at the towering structure before me, wondering if I'd gone to the wrong place. The door was locked. But I'd confirmed the address with Remy that same morning. It had turned into one of those unreasonably and unseasonably hot September afternoons, the kind that belonged back in August. I could feel sweat gathering on my hairline.

"You need in here?" While I was peering upward an older man had stepped out of the shop next door. "Oh hi, yeah, is this the door, or…?" I was glad to see someone. "Yea, it is, this place always confuses people," he said as he rapped a few times on the glass door. He seemed like he'd done this before. "Oh ok, well, I'm glad to know I'm not entirely crazy," I quipped, "I didn't think to knock." He was peering through the front of the building, watching for movement, saying something about how the lights appeared to be off. I stepped forward to look with him. We exhaled in unison when we noticed a woman heading towards the door. I thanked the man for his help. As he brought a cigarette to his mouth he nodded his head and squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, the way some people do when accepting a compliment, and stepped back towards his shop. Was it his shop? I kind of wanted to have a smoke with him so I could ask, but I was definitely sweating by then. I was ready to go inside.

“Hi, I’m Sarah, I have a meeting with Remy?” I blared when she opened the door. I still wonder if I said it as loud as my memory tells me I did. I still wish I could remember what she said in return. I still wonder why I never saw her again after that day. I had loudly stated my purpose, and the man with the smokes had knocked loudly on the plate glass, and meanwhile, inside, about fifteen organizers sat quietly together, heads bowed, in a healing circle. As soon as I saw candles, I heard low music, and then noticed chairs huddled closely in a circle. *Fuck*, I thought, *I definitely interrupted*. My shoulders fell as the woman escorted me through the room. Remy jumped up from working on his laptop as soon as he saw us coming—he immediately said something about the building entrances being confusing. I apologized for being a little early, and for interrupting… What had I interrupted? Remy explained that healing circles were very common at TCO and necessary for organizers working on the front lines of social justice activism. “We’re all just trying to make sense of the brutality and chaos that the last week has been,” he said, circling his index finger in the air like a whirlwind.

I didn’t ask exactly what he meant, because I felt like I knew. I wonder what he would have said. I presumed he was referring to any number of feelings about events in or around Charlotte, NC. Earlier that week 43-year-old Keith Lamont Scott was fatally shot by police. Minutes afterward Scott’s daughter recounted what happened using Facebook Live: "They shot my daddy 'cause he's Black. He was sitting in his car reading a mother fucking book. So they shot him. That's what happened.” The national news media didn’t put it that way of course, and despite playing the video over and over again, most of the mainstream media seemed to ignore her perspective entirely. CNN kept bringing up a car

crash that left Scott mentally impaired, and kept saying it was "unclear" whether or not Scott had a gun, and kept bringing up the "blackness" of the police officer who shot Scott. Later they honed in on the fact that the protests—where civilians were killed and others were injured. Remy might've referenced all of none of this if I'd I asked what he meant or what the week had been like for him. It didn't feel appropriate to spring trauma on someone within minutes of meeting them, and at the time I felt like I knew what he meant.

State sanctioned violence against Black Americans felt far too ordinary, feelings of outrage felt far too familiar, and national media coverage proved that as a country we were far short of a collective story about what was happening and why. Remy might've said something like that. He might've said something that he, as a young Black man, was experiencing, that a young white woman couldn't understand. Should I have asked? Should I have called attention to a disparity in our grief? What was the disparity exactly? Disrupting the healing circle had made me feel rude and invasive, and I didn't want to make a worse impression by seeming out of touch.

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Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by George Zimmerman—and in July of 2013 he was found not guilty of that crime (Florida v. Zimmerman). In response, three radical Black organizers created #BlackLivesMatter—a "Black-centered political will and movement building project—a phenomenon that would grip the country's attention. While violence

against people of color is arguably how the United States was established, the emergence of Black Lives Matter marks an important point of reference in this country's story because it represents a cultural boiling point. The hashtag would go on to be one of the most used on modern social media, according to the Pew Research Center (CITE). #BlackLivesMatter seemed to force issues of race into the cultural living room. It was only a few weeks later that I moved from Missouri to Minnesota to begin doctoral studies in writing and rhetoric. Just as a race-oriented social movement emerged, I undertook new roles and new conversations in a new city and a new state.

A year later a Missouri police officer killed Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager in Ferguson. The freshmen in my writing class and I stumbled through conversations about what was happening in Ferguson and what was happening in the country more broadly. I mourned for my home-state. After a grand jury failed to indict officer Darren Wilson, I felt enraged. I watched the protests and followed the conversation using #Ferguson on Twitter. The place was a police state (see Figure 1). Minutes after sitting down in our graduate research seminar the next day, my fellow colleagues and I decided to attend a protest happening on the university mall. We carried signs with Michael Brown's face and screamed out, "Black Lives Matter." I went home to Missouri the next day. It was Thanksgiving. I cried and got into screaming matches with some of my closest friends and family members—all of them white. I couldn't believe the racism I heard coming out of their mouths. By the time I returned to Minnesota, I was glad to be away from them. I found myself living outside of the only state where I felt like I

understood racial politics, but now I didn't even recognize the place. I didn't recognize some of my friends or family members, either.

Figure 1. Famous image from Ferguson, MO, November 2016

What happened in Ferguson, and the conversations that happened as a result of the Black Lives Matter movement, influenced my relationships, my work, and my life. Some time after I interrupted the healing circle that day at TCO, I thought back to a moment when I learned about the disparity of grief. I was at a Black Lives Matter protest that took place shortly after Freddie Gray was killed by Baltimore police in the spring of 2015 (see Figure 2). That evening a young Black organizer looked out over a crowd of more than a thousand Minnesotans gathered in Gold Medal Park and called attention to huge number of white folks in the crowd. She asked all people of color to come to the top of the hill

where she spoke through a megaphone. She explained the pain and fear people of color were experiencing needed to be made central in that moment. I'm not sure I'd heard anyone in Minnesota say something so honest or so necessary—the passive aggression in Minnesota is too real—and it was a formative experience for me. She asked all the white allies to stay back, to move down the hill, and to be quiet. And I did. I think I even bowed my head. That experience shaped my role as a white ally and established some boundaries that I don't know if I had previously. I still think about it all the time, especially when I think about shared and unshared grief, when I think about emotional labor, and when I think about #whitefolkwork.

Figure 2. Photo of BLM protest in Minneapolis, MN, April 2015

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The doors were open to each of the offices that lined a brightly room with two large tables at the center. The table-top and the walls were completely covered with posters, drawings, writing, banners, colors, photos, notes, and other writing, from the floor to the ceiling. The space, Remy said, was a good way to tell the story of TCO, an activist group formed in 2010 by organizers who met while working on local issues related to #OccupyWallstreet. I noticed some #Occupy tokens on the walls. I've always loved writing and I particularly love writing-rich environments—from personal inspiration boards to community bulletin boards—so I looked around the room in awe. I thought about all the different tools that had been used to create those materials. I noticed some of it was done in colored pencil, some marker, some of it was printed, a great deal of it was handwritten. It was so colorful and loud. Remy and I stood there and marveled at it together for a few minutes.

To our left a woman sat in one of the offices, looking out and smiling warmly behind a large desk, which was also covered in paper. Remy introduced her as Angela, and in the same breath, proclaimed that this was the woman singlehandedly responsible for establishing *Beyoncé Day* in Minneapolis. *Pause for emphasis.* This glorious occasion was established after Minnesota Governor Mark Dayton signed a formal proclamation in 2016; I knew this much. But what I did not know was that it was Angela who suggested the celebration and compelled the Governor and the Lieutenant Governor. Ahead of Beyoncé's concert performance in Minneapolis, Angela insisted that the artist's positive

social impact, and especially the importance of her music for women and young girls, deserved recognition. Thus, a formal state proclamation was signed and tweeted by Governor Mark Dayton on May 23, 2016 (CITE). Beyoncé performed at the University of Minnesota that night and several of my girlfriends were there that night and I was so disappointed I couldn't go. I remember being proud to live in Minnesota that day, particularly after the media storm that followed Dayton's tweet. Local newspapers cover the story, but I was surprised to see national publications from Time to Breitbart pick it up. To say I was *thrilled* to meet Angela would be an understatement. "Oh my god, I have to shake your hand," I gushed. She seemed a little embarrassed and said she was OK with people not knowing the holiday was her accomplishment.

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TCO had recently moved into this building after a fire destroyed their old office down the block. The fire raged for over three hours, taking out local businesses and apartments as well housed in the historic buildings that housed them. Only four injuries were reported, but eleven apartments were burned up and in sum, twenty-three people lost all their belongings that day. TCO organizers leading a thousand-person march for a higher minimum wage that morning, but by that afternoon they launched a fundraiser for community members who were affected. TCO raised and distributed over $20,000 to residents displaced by the fire. With the help of the grassroots community, and a few prominent citizens, TCO organization raised enough funds to purchase the lot where their office had been and rebuild. *Building is the thing, you see*. Organizers were working on a

deal, but after investigators revealed that arson was the probable cause of the fire, negotiations fell through. “We raised all the money, but in the end the owner wouldn’t let us build,” Remy told me, with hints of despair and irritation. *Damn*.

Remy and I both talk absurdly fast, so talking came easy. At the time I didn’t know one-to-one meetings were a recurrent form of labor for organizers like him, but it makes sense looking back. He was used to talking about TCO to a variety of audiences. I guess asked what some might describe as a “grand tour” type questions (Spradley, 1979) about TCO but I largely followed his lead. As we settled into chairs on either side of a wooden desk, I think I asked him about the momentum I was noticing. I felt like I’d seen the organization’s name all over the place the previous summer and I had a couple friends who were getting more directly involved. “Yea, there’s a *bunch* of reasons,” Remy said, as a laundry list seemed to populate in a thought bubble just above his head. “The conversations we’re leveraging” was the one that seemed the most important—perhaps because it was last?—but he also said the organization’s hybrid model, their physical space, and their leadership were reasons for their success. TCO is made up of 95% Black leadership—out of 20 full-time employees—all of whom are from the Twin Cities. “We’ve had consultants come in from outside, but otherwise we’re completely local.” Home-grown leadership, and grassroots involvement, is an important at TCO.

With membership numbers in the thousands (local and non-local), members pay dues, attend meetings, and vote on campaigns driven by local issues, particularly for those living in under-resourced communities and communities of color. “We leverage people

power," Remy told me. "We're willing to work with-*in* and with-*out* the system… We aren't afraid to shut down a city council meeting or walk on a freeway, but we are really interested in policy change." He told me about the policy which was an outcome of their campaign for paid sick-leave as an example: "150,000 people's lives will change for the better once that policy takes effect." He said TCO interns analyze campaigns like that one from start to finish during their training: "From the moment a member brings an issue to the table to the moment a policy takes effect." I was eager to hear more about those trainings. I was eager to hear more about everything TCO was doing. I was really interested their new campaign on police accountability. "We decided to sit down and think about how we can stop paying the police force thousands of dollars a year to kill us." *I'm in,* I thought. I later learned that, in fact, the Minneapolis Police Department had an annual budget of $160 million.

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Jamar Clark was shot and killed by Minneapolis police in November 2015. There were protesters outside the Governor's Mansion for weeks afterward. Philando Castile was shot and killed by Saint Paul police in July 2016. The officer, Jeronimo Yanez, fired seven shots into the vehicle where Castile sat with his girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds, and daughter, Dae'Anna. Reynolds recorded Facebook Live footage of her boyfriend's final moments and her four-year-old Dae'Anna comforted her: "It's OK, Mommy. It's OK, I'm right here with you." There were protesters outside the Governor's Mansion again, but the shockwaves from the Castile's shooting and Reynolds' video moved through the

country with force and with speed. There was a general sense of uprising in the Twin Cities, but this was beyond. Just a day before Castile was murdered, Louisiana police shot and killed Alton Sterling in Louisiana. It was too much. It was *just* too much. It was *all* too much.

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My memory tells me there were over 100 people in the room that day. TCO was packed (see Figure 3). I wanted to get some pizza but couldn't see it from where I was sitting, I didn't want to lose my seat, so I didn't get any. As I was craning my neck to lay eyes on the pizza I noticed some of the relics from bank, which previously occupied TCO's current space. There was still a recognizable main desk area, some teller windows, and a big open floor where I was sitting, where people probably used to form lines. *What a departure*, I thought. I'd been meagerly talking to a woman sitting next to me who taught at a school nearby, where a friend of mine did her student teaching as a matter of fact. She said it was her first time at TCO. Did I bring up the bank relics to her? I can't remember. I was still thinking about it though. Slap some vivid paint on the walls, pepper in some groovy local art, pack the space with folks who want to speak truth to power… *What an improvement*, I thought. I shouldn't assume everyone was for the same reason, I suppose. This was the first meeting for the police accountability campaign that Remy told me about a few weeks earlier. The public event description on Facebook read as follows:

> It's more and more clear every day – our current model of 'public safety' is simply not keeping us safe. With every death we mourn – Philando Castile, Jamar

> Clark, Korryn Gaines, Tyre King, Terrence Crutcher, Keith Lamont Scott – we know that it's time to envision a world without punitive and antiquated models of law enforcement. We must begin to build and resource radical new public safety alternatives to police.

I was there because I knew that to be *true* (I didn't quite know what to do about the *power* part). I wanted to get more involved in local racial justice work because I was upset, pissed off, confused, disillusioned with academia, and wanted to participate in my community. I was starting to understand that I needed to be doing local *anti*-racist work on-the-regular. Evidently, I wasn't the only one. The room was full of white people.

Figure 3. Photo of first meeting at TCO

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Author David Lawrence Grant wrote about the unsettling sense of white homogeneity in Minnesota as part of a recent collection titled *A Good Time for the Truth: Race in Minnesota* (2016). The collection features sixteen of the best local writers, all of whom share stories about what it's like to be a person of color in this blue state, known for "progressive politics." Grant deconstructs and challenges this reputation by weaving personal reflection and broader cultural narrative. He opens the chapter reflecting on a pivotal moment when he realized the state's progressive reputation is closely linked to a self-image of *whiteness*, which is often instantiated through something called *Minnesota Nice*. Grant writes: "*Minnesota Nice* is much, much more than just a set of behaviors: it's an entire way of looking at and understanding the world that sits at the very heart of the culture here. And like any world view, it's just as full of rules—both spoken and unspoken—as it is full of truths, half-truths, lies, *damned lies*, and contradictions" (p. 197).[6]

I didn't know about Minnesota Nice before I moved here. I still can't say what it is exactly—Grant does a much better job than I could—but my experience tells me it has to do with passive aggression, over-politeness, and avoidance of conversations about power and privilege. My experience also tells me it's a tough place for transient residents, looking to become part of a friend group or neighborhood collective, to settle in. Shortly after I moved here from Kansas City, a friend described *Minnesota Nice* this way:

[6] This is strikingly similar to how Dyson (2017) talks about Whiteness, as "a problem to be struggled with, a culture in which one comes to maturity, an identity one inherits and perpetuates, an ideology one might flourish under and, in turn, help mold, an institution from which one benefits, an ethos in which one breathes, a way of life, a declared, willful innocence."

“Minnesotans will draw you a map to anywhere except to their own front door.” That friend lived here for five years and promptly moved away. Another friend, years later, said this about Minnesota: “I don't know where the phrase comes from – it’s just one of those things you hear and it feels like a truism to me – that in the North they don't care how high you get as long as you don't get too close, and in the South they don't care about how close you get as long as you don't get too high. The idea being that in the North you could be a black doctor as long as you stay away - in the South they don't want you to be a doctor, but you can live across the street.” I remember trying to find the origin of that phrase and not having any luck; that is until last summer when Marlon James, local author and professor, referenced a similar version in a Facebook post. James writes:

> Legendary comedian Dick Gregory’s take on American racism [is] still the most succinct and dead on analysis of race in American society I have ever read. He wrote in a 1971 issue of Ebony: “Down South white folks don’t care how close I get as long as I don’t get too big. Up North white folks don’t care how big I get as long as I don’t get too close.”

James talks about how Minnesota is a tough place to make friends; it seems like nobody wants to get close. But perhaps more to the point, James writes about how it’s a tough place to be Black. He goes on:

> I should have known that a man as wise as Gregory meant so much more. And I did not realize until just now, that big can mean literally big, and close can mean 20 feet away, and how 10 years of living in Minnesota as a ‘big, black guy’ has led me to a gradual though futile ‘reduction’ of myself to get closer.

James titled his post “Smaller, and Smaller, and Smaller.” He posted it to Facebook on Saturday, June 17, 2017 – the day after Jeronimo Yanez, the police officer who killed Philando Castile, was acquitted of all charges. It went viral.

> Get big but don’t get close means everybody is so proud of their liberal credentials, so proud that they don’t see colour, that they never see the absence of it. Because well to see that, one would have to get close … Get big but don’t get close means that I’m more famous than most people of colour in Minnesota, and yet in ten years I have only four close friends who were born here. In ten years I have only seen the home of five people. And I like to think that I’m insulated by academic privilege, but Skip Gates was fucked with in the North, as was every person Claudia Rankine writes about in Citizen. I would bike to work in full academic regalia if not for police assuming that I probably stole it anyway, and of course, shooting me. I don’t trust law enforcement, even when I need to call on law enforcement, and every person of colour in this city has to deal with the very real possibility that to call for help can mean that you are the one who gets killed. So, white person, I’m sorry but I can’t be the guy who calls the cops when something is happening to you, because their first assumption will be that I’m the guy I called about.

—

Amara, one of the TCO organizers, quieted the group and thanked everyone for coming. She asked that we begin by sharing our preferred pronouns. In the time it took to get to me I remember wondering if I should start saying “they/them” in these situations. But I couldn’t decide if that would be right or wrong, and for some irrational reason I always get nervous when I have to say something simple in big group settings—even if it’s just

my name—so I went with my usual "she/her" when it was my turn. *Names and genders aren't simple things at all really, are they?*

Amara (she/her) introduced young Black woman named Tanya (she/her). Before Tanya said anything, I remember thinking she didn't seem altogether comfortable. She was tall. Her gaze was cast downward. Over the next 2-3 minutes Tanya told us the story of when she called the local police department to help her resolve a situation and officers showed up and shot her. Twice. In her house. In front of her family. I'll never forget the way she motioned in towards her stomach with her two fingers as she showed us how the bullets went in. I don't know if that's exactly how or where they went in, but that's what she gestured and that's what matters. That's how it felt to her. She didn't speak very loudly, she wasn't up there for very long, and she looked downward the whole time. She told us things didn't have to go down the way that they did and she wishes they hadn't. She told us, and showed, that we need alternatives means for public and community safety. Amara acknowledged Tanya's bravery and thanked her for sharing her story. When Amara ceded the floor to Remy, so he could give his PowerPoint presentation on policing models, the room felt loudly silent.

Remy spoke about the history of policing in the United States. He started by talking about the origins of the antiquated model. He told us how the first formal slave patrol was established in 1704 in South Carolina. Armed militia were ordered to apprehend and punish any African Americans caught without documentation from wealthy, white, plantation-owning men. While the first police department was established in Boston in

1838, slave patrols were already institutionalized by then, and the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 further established the patrol's use of force. Remy mentioned that some referred to the 1850 Act as the Bloodhound Law because of the dogs that were used to "hunt" runaway slaves. When he began walking through the relationship between slave patrol tactics and tactics used by the modern police force, I wondered what the modern equivalent was for the dogs… (see Figures 4 and 5).

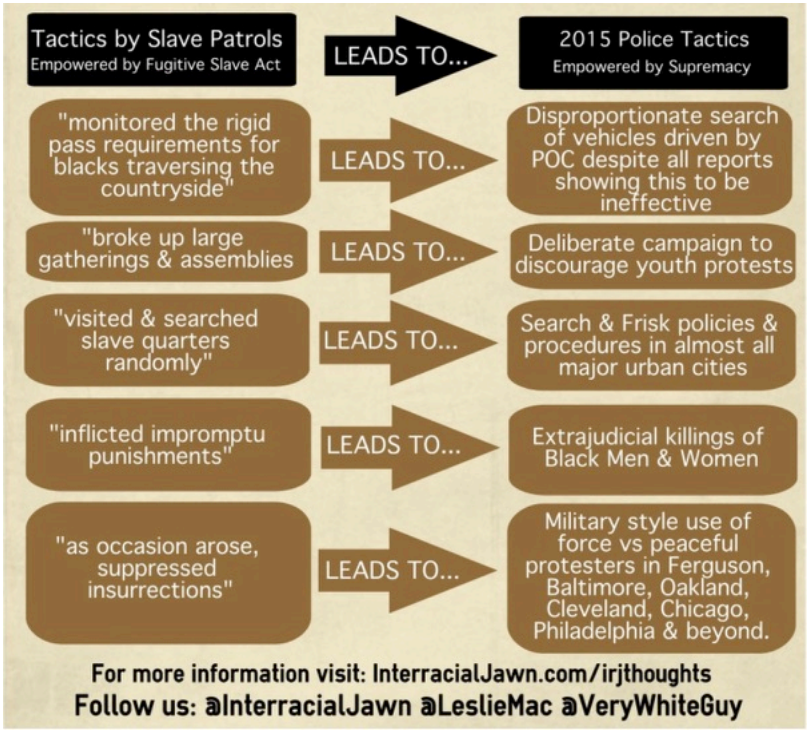


Figure 4. Image displayed during presentation.

Figure 5. Image displayed during meeting, taken in Baton Rouge, LA, July 2016.

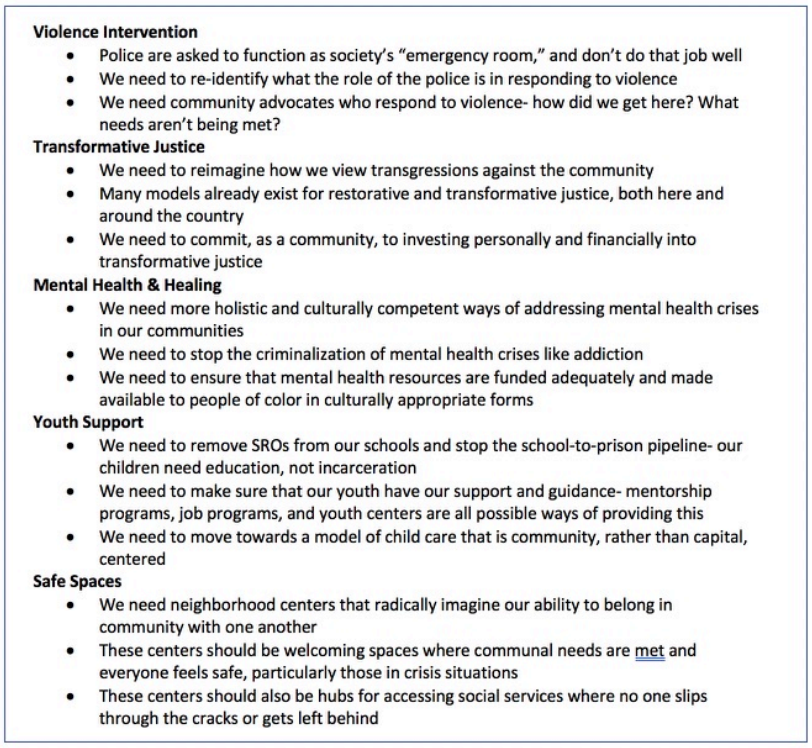
"Enough is enough," Remy said. "It's time for us to start talking about taking these systems back and making sure the policing system we have is dismantled." He told us about modern alternatives to public safety, referencing community policing models being piloted in areas of Chicago and New York. He told us we'd be splitting up into a couple groups to discuss alternative visions to safety in our community and solutions for decreasing police intervention (see Figure 6). He said we needed to use our imaginations, to share our most creative ideas. Then he told us about Step Up/Step Back – which he described as a model for discussion where people who usually speak up take a step back, and those who usually don't should step up. People of color were to speak first and ahead of white people in every breakout, each of which was facilitated by a Black organizer. I went with the "youth support" group that set up near me. I'm not sure if it was because I didn't want to move my chair, or because of who I saw gravitating towards the group, or some other reason, but I remember feeling like I didn't know a damn thing about what youth might need. I don't have kids and I don't know any kids, I thought.

Maybe that was why I only spoke up once over the next twenty minutes or so, as we discussed the need for community spaces where young people can just hang out—a young Black musician in the group had a couple good ideas for youth art projects—and the need to get police officers out of the local elementary schools. I was hyper-aware of each time white people spoke; the older white woman sitting next to me spoke up several times, and I remember it made me feel uncomfortable at the time, but looking back now, she had a couple good ideas and she didn't speak out of turn. She wrote down everyone else's ideas in a spiral notebook that looked heavily used. (Later I found out she was an organizer herself.) I only spoke up once. I said something about how childcare is being oppressively expensive, which I based on what I'd heard a few of my friends say. It was a valid, relevant addition to the group discussion, so I don't know why I felt nervous to say it. I didn't want to speak out of turn.

Figure 6. Photo of breakout groups

We came back together as a group and reported back some of our conversation pieces. TCO organizers wrote the group suggestions by hand on big pieces of white paper that had some kind of adhesive on the top; they stuck where ever you wanted to put them. Remy emailed everyone the next day with the formalized version of the writing (see Figures 7 and 8).

Figure 7. Photo of writing on the wall



Violence Intervention

- Police are asked to function as society's "emergency room," and don't do that job well
- We need to re-identify what the role of the police is in responding to violence
- We need community advocates who respond to violence- how did we get here? What needs aren't being met?

Transformative Justice

- We need to reimagine how we view transgressions against the community
- Many models already exist for restorative and transformative justice, both here and around the country
- We need to commit, as a community, to investing personally and financially into transformative justice

Mental Health & Healing

- We need more holistic and culturally competent ways of addressing mental health crises in our communities
- We need to stop the criminalization of mental health crises like addiction
- We need to ensure that mental health resources are funded adequately and made available to people of color in culturally appropriate forms

Youth Support

- We need to remove SROs from our schools and stop the school-to-prison pipeline- our children need education, not incarceration
- We need to make sure that our youth have our support and guidance- mentorship programs, job programs, and youth centers are all possible ways of providing this
- We need to move towards a model of child care that is community, rather than capital, centered

Safe Spaces

- We need neighborhood centers that radically imagine our ability to belong in community with one another
- These centers should be welcoming spaces where communal needs are met and everyone feels safe, particularly those in crisis situations
- These centers should also be hubs for accessing social services where no one slips through the cracks or gets left behind

Figure 8. Breakout writing from first meeting

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"Academic spaces make me uncomfortable. They're way too full of way too many white people who are way too comfortable … Comfort is a tool of white supremacy and oppression." – paraphrase of a comment made at the Eastside Freedom Library in Saint Paul, Minnesota

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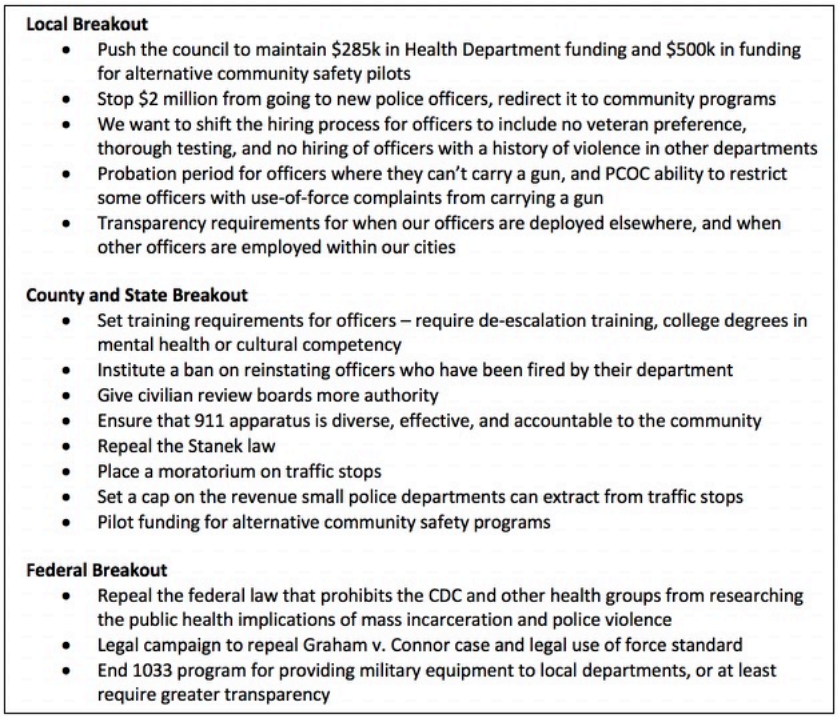
"When was the first time you realized you couldn't trust the cops?" he asked. As we went around the room and answered that question, it quickly became clear that everyone was

dissatisfied with the police. Even the folks in the circle who said they didn't know they couldn't trust the cops until recently, even they had good ideas to share about ideal systems of safety.

We were brainstorming about policy that day at TCO—trying to come up with possibility options that could lead to a world without police and police violence. I was in the federal breakout group up near the front windows. The room was loud that day. The other breakouts groups were brainstorming local and state policies, and I remember being a little jealous. I couldn't come up with any good ideas. I wanted to overthrow all the systems. I remember thinking about alternative forms of national service, ones that could replace the military and the university, but then I thought about how corrupt those systems are already, and about the recalcitrance of racism. Others had the same thought. Our suggestions, after coming back together as a whole group, ended up being more about repealing policies rather than instantiating any new ones (see figure 9).



Local Breakout

- Push the council to maintain $285k in Health Department funding and $500k in funding for alternative community safety pilots
- Stop $2 million from going to new police officers, redirect it to community programs
- We want to shift the hiring process for officers to include no veteran preference, thorough testing, and no hiring of officers with a history of violence in other departments
- Probation period for officers where they can't carry a gun, and PCOC ability to restrict some officers with use-of-force complaints from carrying a gun
- Transparency requirements for when our officers are deployed elsewhere, and when other officers are employed within our cities

County and State Breakout

- Set training requirements for officers – require de-escalation training, college degrees in mental health or cultural competency
- Institute a ban on reinstating officers who have been fired by their department
- Give civilian review boards more authority
- Ensure that 911 apparatus is diverse, effective, and accountable to the community
- Repeal the Stanek law
- Place a moratorium on traffic stops
- Set a cap on the revenue small police departments can extract from traffic stops
- Pilot funding for alternative community safety programs

Federal Breakout

- Repeal the federal law that prohibits the CDC and other health groups from researching the public health implications of mass incarceration and police violence
- Legal campaign to repeal Graham v. Connor case and legal use of force standard
- End 1033 program for providing military equipment to local departments, or at least require greater transparency

Figure 9. Breakout writing from second meeting

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I woke up after the Presidential election to a number of things. That morning I woke up to emails, as usual, two of which were from my teaching group. I was responsible for mentoring these five graduate students who were teaching first-year writing for the first time. They asked, specifically, for advice and for comfort. I'd taught first-year writing a number of times, and I'd led a couple of teaching groups before, but I'd never been in that position. Luckily, one of my teaching mentors had already posted the prompt he was going to ask his students to write about that day. I shared it with my teaching group, along with a quote from a pedagogical text I admire. I didn't really have words of my own to share. The weeks that followed felt like a process of radicalization. I was moved by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's words: "Now is the time to talk about what we are

actually talking about… Now is the time to discard that carefulness that too closely resembles a lack of conviction." I wanted to do something more substantial, but I didn't know what. I emailed Nicole, one of the organizers I'd recently met with, and told her I'd help out at TCO in any whatever way was needed. I wasn't the only one.

—

I remember thinking there were a lot of people at TCO that night that I'd never seen before. It was just a few days after the election and I remember wondering if that was why. I remember wondering if I'd just never seen those people before, though; it wasn't like I knew everyone. I remember noticing a white kid who standing up in the middle of the room. He seemed to be about 18 years old—which I guess I determined based on his hoodie, his acne, and his general demeanor. He definitely seemed new. I remember noticing him again a little while later. He was standing next to the white guy that asked a TCO organizer to explain why the organization (and in particular, the new post-election campaign for resistance) would be led exclusively by organizers of color.

I wish I had notes about what happened next. I wasn't taking notes that night.

All I remember is that Drake—arguably the leader of the organization, despite the decentralized leadership model—intervened in that moment. He said that TCO's Black organizers—and the experience of Black Americans in general—were uniquely suited for the current political moment. I wish I could remember exactly what he said… He talked

about how their lived experiences and the history of racial oppression uniquely prepares Black Americans to inform the present political moment and guide the political movement for racial justice. Surprise, surprise—the white people had some feelings they wanted to share about that. I don't remember what they said either—some bullshit white tears. I remember the look of patience on Drake's face as he listened. Only a minute or so had passed before a very loud, assertive voice of a woman halted the parade of white tears. I couldn't see her, she was standing somewhere in the back of the room and I didn't want to crane my neck. "I think the white people in the room need to be a little more aware of the space we're taking up in the room, with all of our questions, and all of our misgivings…" I wish I could remember what she said word-for-word! It was epic. This white woman told the new white people, with all the new post-election, feelings to shut up and listen for once. That's when I noticed the kid in the hoodie again. His arms were still crossed.

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"We're on the northside on a cold Wednesday, a room full of people talking about race, class, resistance. My sense is this is happening all over the country, all over the country there are rooms just like things. People are wrestling with this, wanting to resist, that's tremendously hopeful… There is a mass resistance all over the country, and there is an element of joy. When I talk to people there's both fear, but there is an optimism, and a big middle finger fuck you, we're going to do it our way. A lot of that is coming from youth and folks of color, and can we bring that to rural America? It's an amazing

opportunity... This is a country where an abolitionist movement fundamentally wrestled with *whether or not I'm a human being*. This is nothing compared to some of the social movements that we've been through in this country. We've pushed through, we've created a better country. This is no different than that. In fact it's probably less daunting that a lot of the other moments we've been in and there's a major, major opportunity to re-shape and re-wire the country if we seize the moment and don't shy away from it." – Drake, TCO leader, public interview, December 2016

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Angela was leading the meeting at TCO that day. She told us we were going to design a new city—fashion it out of thin air. She was using one of those big sheets of paper, the ones with wicked strong adhesive. She started to draw the trunk of a tree using a brown marker. She drew some squiggles at the bottom of the page that looked like little veins. These, she said, were the roots of our city. The roots the grounding, the foundation of any city, made up of the morals, ethics and values. She asked us to participate by calling out suggestions for roots. Folks began to call out words. Some were phrases, some were concepts, some were feelings … *equity, justice, empathy, respect* … The trunk, Angela said, represented the look of the overall system of the city … *communication, safety to worship, good public transit* … A woman who called *department of peace* contrasted it against a *department of justice*. The whole room seemed to nod in agreement with the thought. Angela said the branches, the next expression of the tree, are the everyday tangible wins … *community first-responders, mandated townhalls, rent stabilization,*

parental leave … Angela told us that the leaves on our tree are the manifestation of the aforementioned wins … *less prisoners, happy children, street parties, community art, less cars* … Angela had been handwriting each of these by hand. When someone called out less fear, more eye contact Angela decided to draw an eyeball with eyelashes, with an upward arrow next to it, instead of writing (see Figure 10).

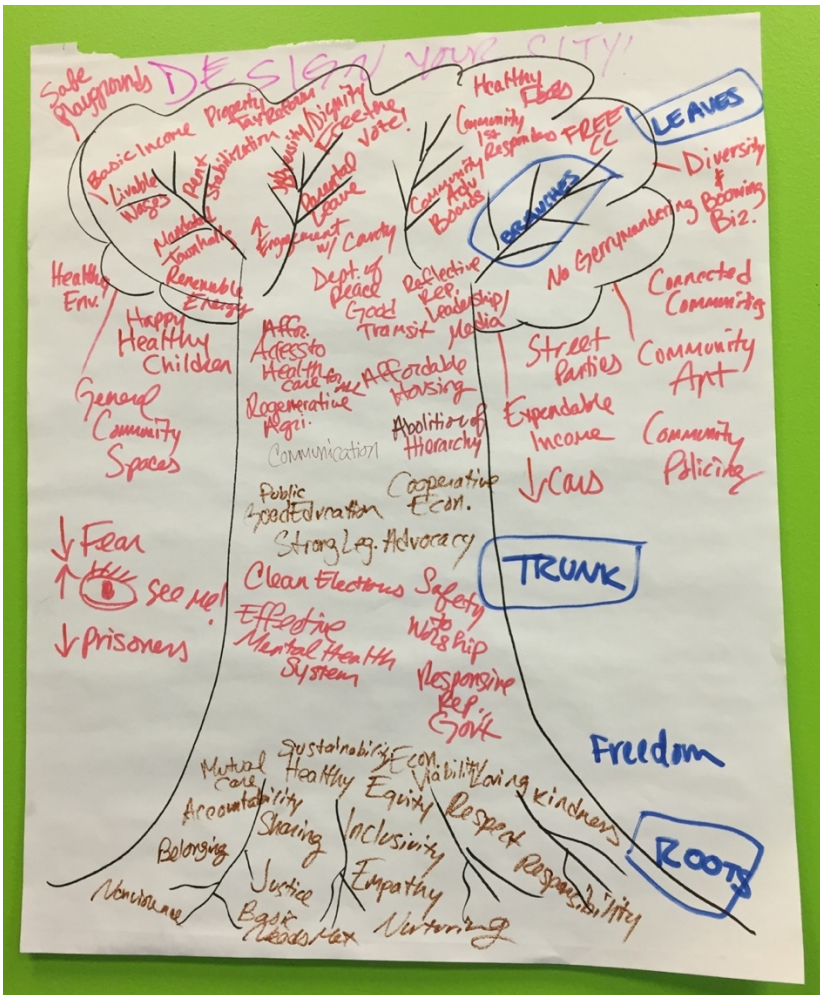

Figure 10. Photo of 'Design Your City' activity

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I got the email from Remy while I was grading student papers. I wasn't able to go to the city council meeting on account of all that grading, and it still wasn't done. I'd heard that the council chambers felt similar to how I did when I read about the city council's final budget (see figure 11). I was proud of the work put in, disappointed in the system and city leaders, and exhausted emotionally. I was glad to see that Remy considered the pilot programs a major victory in his email, and glad to know that he was taking some time to rest over the holidays. I knew I'd be back in January, and so would he, to talk about next steps. *There's always next-steps*. Onward and upward.

Below is a list of funds we managed to get invested in alternative public safety programs. [REDACTED] [Items 1-3] were things proposed by the Mayor that we defended, [items 4-8] were good amendments that were passed after we turned out dozens of people to the budget hearings.

- $185,000 in ongoing funding to the Health Department for Group Violence Intervention and Youth Violence Prevention aid and funding to community partners.
- $261,000 in ongoing funding and more money one time to create a 3-person mental health co-responder pilot at the Minneapolis Police Department.
- $500,000 in one time funds to invest in community-directed alternative safety strategies in West Broadway and Little Earth!
- Amendment by Goodman: $250,000 taken from Meet Minneapolis to fund alternative community safety strategies through the Downtown Improvement District.
- Amendment by Bender: $67,000 taken from Fire Department and Public Health fund to fund Youth Violence Prevention through the Health Department.
- Amendment by Cano: $50,000 taken from the City Coordinator to fund Culturally Relevant Sex Trafficking Prevention Work through Health Department.
- Amendment by Warsame: $100,000 taken from the Police Special Revenue Fund (WOW) to fund alternative community safety strategies in Phillips West and Ventura Village.
- Amendment by Glidden: $100,000 taken from City Attorney's office to fund Hate Crimes Investigator at Civil Rights Department.

Figure 11. Action results, emailed after city budget meeting

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"I can't do your work for you. We all have our own work to do. Get your people, Sarah."

-Remy

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I hadn't been to that coffeeshop for almost a year; it wasn't my usual. I was sitting there in uptown, at 11pm, trying to finish my dissertation, which was far past due. The baristas were starting to get serious about clean-up, so I packed up the bags I'd been carrying around for weeks. They were full of books I thought I needed to keep with me at all times if I wanted to write anything of value. I noticed a piece of notebook paper on the table next to me with some handwriting on it. As I went to pick it up I remembered that a young woman had been sitting there. How long ago did she leave? I remember moving my bag over a little when she went to sit down on the bench next to me; that was hours ago. I think I liked her glasses. I think she was wearing a head covering. I think she'd written what I was, by then, looking at but not yet reading. I could see that it was a poem of some sort. My gut told me she'd left it on the table on purpose—a piece of community art left for someone, anyone—but I didn't feel entitled to take it. I asked the guy at the next table if it was his. He looked at it for a moment, said no, and handed it back to me. Nothing could have been more *apropos* (see Figure 12).

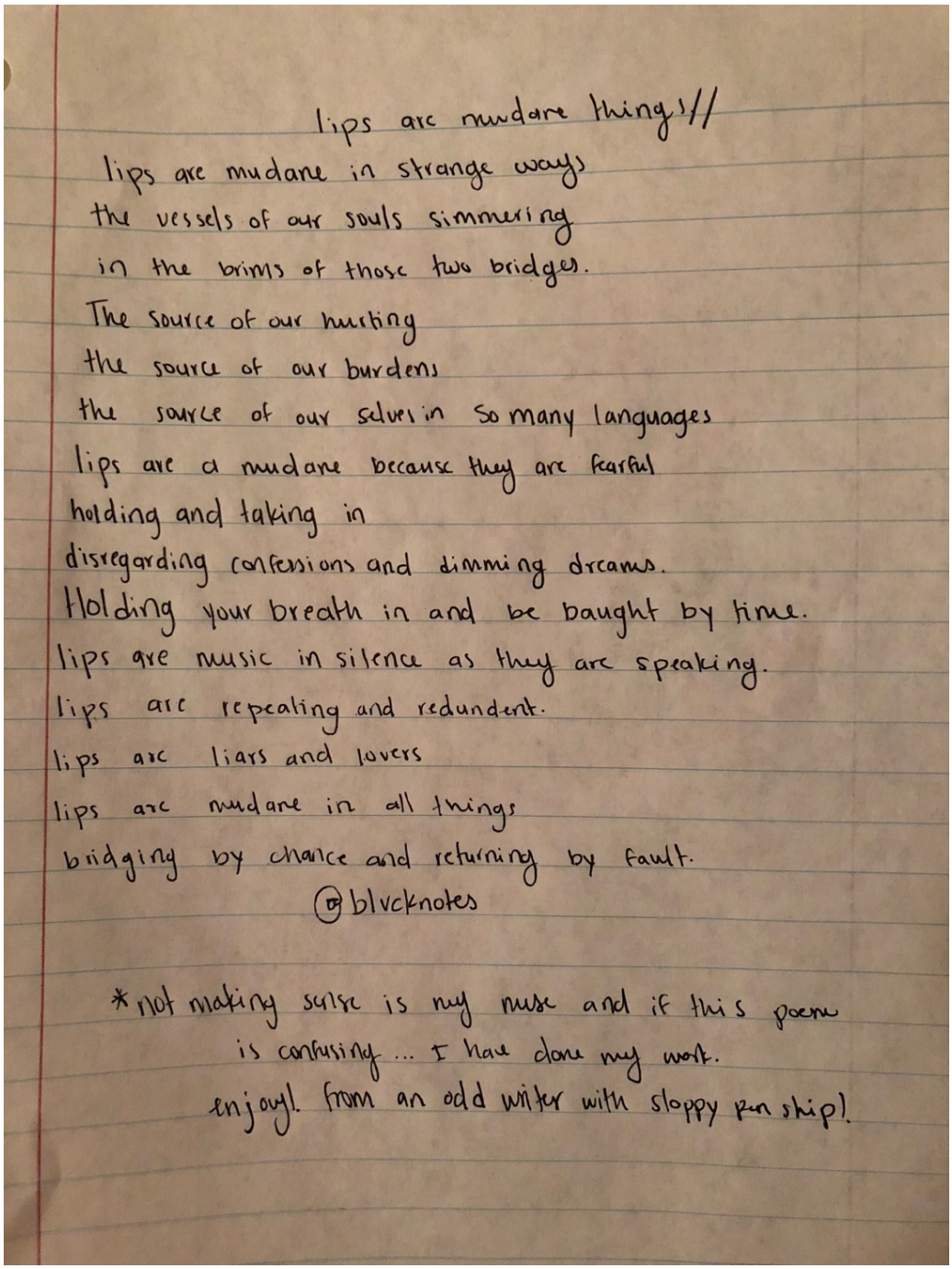

Figure 12. Photo of poem, found in Minneapolis, MN, May 2018

Interchapter commentary

As I suggested in the previous commentary, chapter three is meant to raise questions rather than offer cogent answers. I want to recognize the value of some of the more

established, typical lines of study one could pursue with this data, such as a study of multimodality or embodiment, or an examination of community development. All of these are productive lines of inquiry. The opening vignette, for example, represents a number of points that could be productively critiqued: that I didn't get in the door until someone else knocked, that I felt like a loud, sweaty white girl, that my memory failed me when it did, and so on… As a catalog of data points, these are ripe for analysis and critique. My re-rendering of these events, however, led me to the analysis in in the next chapter. I came to see, over the course of a year, that my notions of "community literacy" were misguided. Community literacy isn't something I know about because of what the literature tells me, community literacy is something that exists, something that lives, something that is cultivated through a series of experiences. Community literacy is cultivated over an extended period of time—several years, perhaps—through sustained participation and observation. Critical community literacy, most importantly, has to have emancipatory potential. I hope this work illustrates my rejection of dissertation genre as an academic experience, which, as Richard Rodriguez (1983) suggests, is an act of *social removal*. My project is inherently social. I hope this work stands as testament to the vast social project of critical literacy and to the process of learning the project requires.

Chapter Four. Towards dialectics

Shirley Brice Heath conceived of *the literacy event* by extrapolating from a set of findings.[7] Since the 1980s, the literacy event has productively guided a great deal of inquiries in the field of literacy studies—as a notion, a concept, a theoretical construct, a unit of analysis, and a category. No matter the designation, literacy events are considered and widely accepted as *empirical*. This means, like all empirical units, literacy events have boundaries. They are finite. They can even be counted, compared, and labeled. Literacy practices, on the other hand, are not empirical. Literacy practices involve intangibles—feelings, values, attitudes—and are thereby too abstract to observe. Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanič (2000) clarified the relationship between two of the field's central concepts: "Events are observable episodes which arise from practices and are shaped by them. The notion of events stresses the situated nature of literacy, that it always exists in a social context" (p. 8). This both establishes the value of the literacy event as a localizing unit and places limitations upon its value for analysis.

In my own ethnographic inquiry, I accepted the literacy event as an observable category with limitations. I purposefully did not, however, accept my own limitations. Accepting the literacy event as an observable category brought with it an assumption about myself—as a viable, trustworthy observer. Throughout the project, I did my best not to accept my own limitations—as a person, as a researcher, as a civic participant, as a friend, and as an ally. The previous chapter performs a series of answers to the question, "How do ethnographic methods afford and constrain?" but should not be misunderstood as a *self-satisfied* answer. As previously stated, it's meant to illustrate the problematics of

[7] According to Barton (1997) the literacy event can be traced further back (p. 36).

my perspective, and the discomfort I felt with participation, observation, and re-presentation. It wasn't inconsequential, ever, that I'm white. My writing does, in the end, re-present. Taken as a whole, it represents only one possible description of the social, political, cultural, and material context for a series of literacy events. My perspective shaped my lived experience of the events as much as they did this writing. While assembling the previous chapter, I tried to embrace what Clough (1992) describes when she says that a researcher's depiction of the empirical world "must reconstruct a struggle to gain a common point of view, a struggle to overcome the insufficiency of perception, a struggle to interchange individual points of view for a common [one]" (p. 33). There is no single, objective way to observe or describe a literacy event. Literacy events, in this way, exist both in and as a social context. This is, perhaps, my most important finding and it sets up for the remainder of this chapter, which is an attempt to nuance the relationship between literacy events and literacy practices.

My participation-observation at TCO, which involved a series of literacy events, reveals that it's important to consider how literacy events are constructed. The literacy event, as Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanic described it above, is typically understood relative to the notion of the literacy practice. More specifically, the concept of the literacy event is bound by its relationship to literacy practices; literacy practices lead to and shape events. While the construction of literacy practices has been broadly attended, the construction of literacy events has received far less attention. The construction of public literacy events like those at TCO warrant our attention.

There are at least four things visible during a literacy event: setting, participants, artifacts, and activities (Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanic (2000) (see Figure 12). This study

largely centers around these four elements; however, I would like to suggest that non-observable elements of literacy practices are also important to the observation of literacy events. For example, Tanya, the woman who spoke about how the police shot her twice in the stomach, when it was she who had contacted police to help ensure her safety in the first place. Tanya's story, as told in her own spoken words, as well as her physical presence seem to obscure the boundaries of the elements visible during a literacy event. Tanya seems to meet criteria for both participant and artifact, though neither accurately or justly describe Tanya, her story, her presence, her body, her pain, her emotional labor, and so on. As such, analyzing a literacy event based primarily on visible elements seems reductive at best, if not entirely dehumanizing. This suggests that literacy events include elements less observable than Hamilton's model suggests. In fact, the events at TCO illustrate how non-visible constituents—which Hamilton equates with a literacy practice—are important elements of these particular literacy events

Table 2.1 Basic elements of literacy events and practices

Elements visible within literacy events (These may be captured in photographs)	*Non-visible constituents of literacy practices (These may only be inferred from photographs)*
Participants: the people who can be seen to be interacting with the written texts	The hidden participants – other people, or groups of people involved in the social relationships of producing, interpreting, circulating and otherwise regulating written texts
Settings: the immediate physical circumstances in which the interaction takes place	The domain of practice within which the event takes place and takes its sense and social purpose
Artefacts: the material tools and accessories that are involved in the interaction (including the texts)	All the other resources brought to the literacy practice including non-material values, understandings, ways of thinking, feeling, skills and knowledge
Activities: the actions performed by participants in the literacy event	Structured routines and pathways that facilitate or regulate actions; rules of appropriacy and eligibility – who does/doesn't, can/can't engage in particular activities

Figure 12. Elements of literacy events and practices

The visible and non-visible bodies are hugely important in this case. It is the loss of Black life and the absence of Black community members that are cited as the primary exigence for the events at TCO. The language used in the public event description is an important textual artifact in this case:

> It's more and more clear every day – our current model of 'public safety' is simply not keeping us safe. With every death we mourn – Philando Castile, Jamar Clark, Korryn Gaines, Tyre King, Terrence Crutcher, Keith Lamont Scott – we know that it's time to envision a world without punitive and antiquated models of law enforcement. We must begin to build and resource radical new public safety alternatives to police.

The events at TCO were organized as a direct result of the execution of Black bodies, the loss of Black life. This is the context for these events—the discursive construction of bodies. A number of rhetorical scholars suggest the body as an important resource for public engagement and argumentation (DeLuca, 1999; Selzer, 1999; Foucault, 1977). Critical scholar Raymie McKerrow (1993) even suggests that rhetoricians attend to areas where bodies are central performers. In this case, it is the absence of bodies, not presence, that cannot and should not be overlooked.[8]

This short event description above is layered with meaning. The growing sense of clarity in the first sentence ("more and more") points towards a set of social circumstances that carry a quality of undeniability. The first sentence invokes a lack of safety while the second sentence indicates, quite plainly, the loss of black life. Mourning

[8] A great deal of rhetorical scholarship deals with the notion of presence (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969; Blair, 1999; Gross, 2005) while a significant portion of methodological literature deals with issue of presence in data sets. Grounded theorists tend to analyze only what's verifiably present, while some more general qualitative coding manuals urge researchers to consider what's not present (Saldaña, 2013).

is recognized as a social-political activity that warrants response. The names of Black community members, recent victims of lethal, state-sanctioned violence, reads as if it's a mere snapshot of a much longer list. All of this combines to form a personal/political motivation to re-imagine safety, as well the measures that ensure safety in the local community. The use of "we" – "our" – and "us" – can be interpreted a number of ways, many of which say something about attendance, membership, and/or participation in and beyond this singular event. In any case, the use of collective pronouns suggests that the audience requested already understands *something* about the policing system, perhaps as an institutionalized expression of racism and violence. This description, in many ways, lays out a criterion for participation that involves recognition of a local, social context.

While the textual social construction of the literacy event is important, so too is the actual construction of the literacy event—the sequencing of the meeting. If we accept the meeting as a singular literacy event, there are recognizable segments: Tanya's story, Remy's presentation, multiple organizer-led breakout groups, and whole group discussion (follow-up conversations with participants confirmed these as recognizable segments). Each segment seems to give rise to the next, rhetorically moving participants through the event. Tanya's story invoked *pathos* while Remy's discussion of the origins of policing provided strong logical reasoning. The organizers' guided direction of the breakout groups both relies on and reifies the ethos of each organizer, and by virtue, the overall ethos of TCO as a decisively Black-led organization, presiding over a movement through critical guidance. It's worth considering that these segments represent multiple, individual literacy events.

Some have considered multiple literacy events in a given social setting. Moss' (1994) analysis of literacy events in African American churches set precedent for considering multiple, linked literacy events. Moss writes about what I would call attendant or ancillary literacy events, which inform the primary literacy event she focuses on (the pastor's sermon). "It is these other literacy events that provide the context from which the sermon takes place" (p. 160). Her analysis shows that literacy events work in concert with other literacy events in ways that support participants: reading the bulletin offers the congregation an understanding (for the order of worship during the service) and allows the congregation to participate (through singing and responsive reading). While she points out multiple literacy events, Moss' analysis focuses on the presence and non-presence of written texts, rather than the discursive or intertextual relationship among the events themselves.

Maybin (2000) writes about the importance of context and intertextuality but she too privileges literacy practices over literacy events. Giving breath to the productivity of social constructivist logics, constructivist literacy studies illustrate the purposeful, embedded nature of literacy practices which are constituted by broader systems and institutions. In Maybin's view, literacy practices are the "conceptual and methodological framework" necessary for inter-relational analysis. Literacy events, while rich and meaningful, are contingent at best. Maybin goes on to outline three levels of inter-relational analysis in literacy studies: a) individual activities, understandings and identities (b) social events and the interactions they involve (c) broader social and institutional structures (p. 198). I agree with Maybin to some extent, but the events at TCO seem to represent more than the "personal and practical" value Maybin suggests.

Literacy scholars seem to prize the dialectic between individuals and broader systems but stop short of saying that literacy events represent political evidence of this dialectic exchange.

Heath (1982) established that literacy events are governed by the community's accepted rules for social interaction and knowledge sharing. Participants, Heath says, follow the community's rules during literacy events. These events, however, reveal that rules are constantly re-established during literacy events. TCO's "step up, step back" model for discussion stands as example. This rule asks participants to govern their behavior. Remy's explanation of the rule—asking people of color to step up and white people to step back—asks that participants govern their behavior with a sense of equity. Assertion of this rule on multiple occasions demonstrates how literacy events serve a sustaining function. The consistent need to re-establish the rule says something about the default arrangement for discussion in the public sphere; people of color are consistently spoken over if they're comfortable contributing at all. The rule also serves as a microcosm of TCO's goal to prioritize voices of color in the local community.

The interaction at TCO, when a white woman reprimanded the new white people, also illustrates the re-establishment of rules. It's still unclear to me now, if she was an established member of TCO who knew that an organization-based rule was being broken, or if she was just someone who knew what was appropriate and she had to be the one to do it. Either would seem to confirm what Barton (2007) suggests, which is that "literacy practices are the general cultural ways of utilizing literacy which people draw upon in a literacy event." Whether it was the literacy event or her broader literacy practices, she re-established a rule that was being broken in that context. She knew when she needed to

stand up and speak, and she knew when she needed to tell other white people to sit down and shut up. It's worth noting that witnessing this act—which re-established a rule—empowered me in some ways and motivated my own self-governance in new ways. This interaction begs a number of questions about the arrangements of power and the racial experience of participants during literacy events. In order to nuance these arrangements, I'd like to call on another central construct in the field: *literacy sponsorship.*

Deborah Brandt conceived of *literacy sponsor* by extrapolating from a set of findings. Like Heath's literacy event, literacy sponsorship has given rise to a great deal of valuable scholarship. Brandt (1998) defines the concept in the following terms: "Any agent, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way." In many ways, this project attributes an assumed level of sponsorship to TCO as an organization—as an organization that cultivates positive community literacy by hosting multiple, interrelated literacy events. It's not inconsequential that attendants at these events—hosted by an exclusively Black-led racial justice organization—are attended by a great deal of white people. Given this arrangement of participation, it's important to consider the contested and ever-evolving relationship between literacy and race.[9]

Fisher (2009) writes about the ways in which African American literacy practices, as found in institutions organized by African Americans, were used for mobilizing and organizing. As she describes ways in which reading, writing, and speaking re-inform literacy, Fisher underscores the value of what she calls "reading the people" in the lives

[9] There's relative consensus in the social sciences that race is a social construction—some of the original social architects being Kant, Hegel, Hume, Gobineau, and Blumenbach—but race is never inconsequential. See Richardson (2003) for strong collection of works about the complexity of African American literacies.

of African Americans: "Reading the people has been one of the most important functions of literacy for Black people in the context of the United States" (p. 21). TCO's consistent re-establishment of Step Up, Step Back can be considered a contemporary example of reading the people, and in some sense, lays out a relationship W. E. B. DuBois identified in 1903. DuBois theorized the concept of *double consciousness*, which refers to an epistemology derived from experience with racial oppression. African Americans, according to DuBois, experienced a psychic split between Negro and American identities. Though a source of emotional distress, DuBois described double consciousness as a "gift" of second sight, perhaps best characterized the ability to see what other (white people) cannot, an aptitude for identifying the myriad state of affairs that dehumanize and oppress.[10]

In some sense, I hope chapter three documents my understanding of TCO as a literacy sponsor. TCO's literacy sponsorship is, in my view, made self-evident by understanding DuBois' theory of double consciousness. In brief, I support this organization because I believe that the narratives of Black Americans should guide any movement for racial justice, local or otherwise.[11] Given the white homogeneity in Minnesota, and the high-profile police shootings that took place in the Twin Cities, TCO represented a place to observe what Brandt and Clinton proposed in 2002 when they proposed "literacy in action" as an analytic frame. Though I chose to operationalize *the literacy event* as an analytic for this study, I would argue TCO, as a black institution and

[10] Wilson (2009) argues that double consciousness is an epistemology that predates and predicts critical race theory.
[11] For clarity sake I want to say that the necessary labor of this pursuit does not, by any means, belong to Black Americans.

an alternative site of learning, represents a contested setting in which to observe *critical literacy sponsorship.*

Brandt and Clinton wrote that, "We need more complicated analytical frames… at sites of reading, writing, and print that can follow the threads of networks both into and out of local context and other contexts" (347-348). As a critical literacy sponsor, TCO represents an analytical frame that attends to local arrangements and transcends the setting temporally and spatially. In hosting events like those documented in chapter three, TCO sponsored events that disrupted the timeline of white supremacy. These events responded to and gave prominence to local race-related issues—and—looked to dismantle historical and systemic arrangements. For the white folks in the room, including me, these events represent a context that requires *unlearning*.

Literacy is, for better or for worse, often equated with learning, which is why a great deal of literacy scholarship still takes place in educational settings. TCO represents a unique setting for a number of reasons; the organization is not traditional, and the setting has very little in common with a traditional academic environment. However, there is still a great deal of education that takes place at TCO, and I would argue that the alternative nature of the setting is what allows for critical, radical, transformative learning. My participation-observation at TCO was prompted by cognitive dissonance; with my local racial experience in Minnesota and my broader experience with race and privilege.[12] Many of the prominent literacy sponsors in the state (and the United States) have a vested interest in *not* discussing race—whereas at TCO, events were not only organized around the notion of race, they sought to dismantle state-sponsored systems

[12] In some sense, this demonstrates the idea that literacy demands shift with social change (Barton, 1997).

and reimagine them. Remy's presentation about the racist origins of the country's police system, for example, intervenes in a timeline of white supremacy. In this way, these literacy events represent a rhetorical in(ter)vention—one that that disrupts mythic timelines of the white oppressor—through the rhetorical-literate sponsorship of Black organizers.[13]

This begs the question of advantage outlined in Brandt's notion of sponsorship. Literacy sponsors always gain advantage by conditioning a particular relationship to literacy. If TCO represents a literacy sponsor, what is the advantage gained? To answer this question from my own perspective (as a benefactor of white supremacist systems) is problematic. To connect the literacy event and the literacy sponsor as analytic concepts is to reify the arrangements of power, be they raced, classed, gendered, etc. But to divorce them is, in my view, an injustice that the field of literacy studies should seek to correct. To that end, I want to suggest that observation of any literacy event—as the field's longstanding empirical category—must be coupled with critical examination of any participant's literacy sponsorship.

Power is at the core of every occasion that involves reading, writing, and speaking—it is indexed in the cultural and ideological arrangement of every literacy event. In the United States, race is a defining construct that is too easily overlooked. I want to suggest that the observance of any literacy event must be accompanied by a critical examination of race. Too often, race is considered an optional consideration, or an addendum, when really, it's a construct that cannot be avoided, and should never be avoided by those who benefit by doing so. We need antiracist dialectics—not analytics—

[13] Gee (1990) writes about the complications of personal memory, historic memory, and mythic memory.

in the field of literacy studies. Pursuing a heuristic with multiple dialectics will fracture the researcher's perspective, as well as the object of inquiry, and affords new possibilities for the situated examination of multiliteracies. It allows researchers to tease out the intersectional arrangements of power in any literacy event. Pursuing dialectics allows researchers to account for a multiplicity of experiences in any event as they consider what's at stake for all participants, including themselves. Towards that end, I'll turn briefly to the rhetorical notion of *kairos*.

The ancient concept of *kairos* provides rich ground from which to critically examine discursive arrangements of power.[14] Linguistically speaking, kairos has no discernible equivalent in English (which, by some standards, recommends it). In antiquity *kairos* was associated with symmetry, propriety, occasion, due measure, fitness, fact, decorum, convenience, proportion, fruit, profit, wise moderation, timing, and opportunity (Sipiora, 2002, p. 1). Kairos has origins and associations in the arts of archery and weaving, where it's understood as an "opening" or an "aperture" that a skilled archer or weaver must see and make use of. The following definition suggests *kairos* has critical discursive value for analysis of any event which involves reading, writing, or speaking: "the right thing must be said at the right time; inversely, the right time becomes apparent precisely because the right thing has been spoken" (Poulakos, 1983, p. 42). The concept seems inherently relevant to the study of context, or, *the rhetorical situation.*[15] The following quote identifies the possibilities of *kairos*:

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[14] The ancient Greek concept of *kairos* has received a great deal of scholarly attention, perhaps more so since critical turn in rhetorical studies—see Poulakos (1983). More recently, rhetorical scholars interested in participatory fieldwork have found utility in the concept—see Hess (2011), Middleton et al (2015), McKinnon et al (2016).

[15] See Bitzer (1968), Vatz (1973), and Consigny (1974) for the commonly cited debate on rhetorical situation.

> Kairos tells us to look for the particular opportunity in a given moment, to find - or construct - an opening in the here and now, in order to achieve something there and then. Pointing as it does to the ways that situations change over time, to the relationship between past and future, to the ways that one moment differs from the next, kairos seems to be a natural tool for examining a discourse (indeed, a form of cultural life) that emphasizes change, development, progress… (Miller, 1994, p. 83)

Those final three words – change, development, progress – carry inherent relevance. But in the dimensions of *kairos*, which Miller identifies, that I would like to suggest give it utility. *It is the dialectic tensions invoked by kairos that suggest its critical discursive value for examining the recalcitrance of racism.*[16] Calling in turn on each of three dialectics—evolutionary/revolutionary, realist/constructivist, temporal/spatial—allows scholars to investigate literacy events, practices, and sponsorship from a more critical standpoint. The table below represents a sample heuristic (see Figure 13).

	evolutionary/revolutionary	realist/constructivist	temporal/spatial
literacy event			
literacy sponsors/hip			

Figure 13. Sample dialectics heuristic

In this chapter I've shown that literacy events take place in response to particular social circumstances, and also, exist as social contexts in and of themselves. Literacy events like those at TCO represent a social context with transformative potential—as they work to

[16] Here I'm invoking Bonilla-Silva (2003) and McPhail (1994, 2001).

both hold space and to disrupt space. The radical, liberatory potential of counterpublics is observable in literacy events like those at TCO. It is because these sites function "as a training ground for agitational activities directed towards wider publics, as well as spaces of withdrawal" that makes them important (Fraser, 1992). I argue that these literacy events work together to cultivate broader practices of a critical community literacy, and as an assemblage, represent an emergent collective that necessitates a varied set of rules for participation over time. The non-normativity of these spaces, collectives, and codes for participation complicate the methods for analysis. Thus, I've suggested a series of complex dialectics, which can help locate the power arrangements of any literacy event.

Interchapter commentary

A couple years ago I was sitting at a table with Eli Goldblatt, Bev Moss, and some other scholars at 4C's in Portland. I was there to workshop this project and helping others workshop their community literacy projects. A woman at the table suggested, in not so many words, that activists are willing to come speak at any university event at any given time. I don't remember how I reacted at the time but based on my experiences with this project I can now say this is unequivocally not true. Embedded in her comment was an assumption about institutional arrangements, something I also found to be true in the expectations of the IRB.[17] Over the course of this project I've had to reckon with those arrangements, and quite frankly, my primary obligation was to my research participants and my local community—not the academy or the university. My relationship with TCO

[17] In communication with the IRB I wrote, "[This] implies that the organization supports the university, as an all-powerful place where knowledge is made. This isn't a belief I'm willing to espouse … The organization's justice work comes first and for me to assume anything else would be a disservice to the communities we collectively serve."

was based largely around my relationships with individual organizers and other local members. Apart from a couple of white undergraduate college students (who I was told interned at TCO but I never saw or met any of them), I was one the only one in the room who worked *expressly* for the university—a mark that both comforted and discomforted me. I was trying to transgress my identity, earnestly, as an academic with white privilege.

When I began speaking about this project in professional settings I was asked a number of times about member checking, co-authoring with participants, and the like. None of these are unproblematic, nor are they categorically justice-bound. My experiences with TCO taught me about the centrality of power in the arrangements of labor. Such arrangements are situated in lived relationships and are bound up in an individual's literacy practices as much as they are patterned by institutions. I thought multiple times, early in the project, that the best thing I could do would be to give TCO organizers the biggest platform I could muster up at the university, which would center voices of color in a preeminent zone of whiteness. I also thought it would be reasonable to ask organizers to write something, which I could then centralize in my research. These were misguided thoughts, in the end. But they brought issues of labor, power, and decolonization to light for me in ways I hadn't previously recognized. I was wrestling with my privilege and saw no way to ethically occupy my position of whiteness—but it's my charge to think and re-think about that in every relationship, every setting, every conversation, and every piece of writing. That's my work.

Chapter Five. Implicating ourselves

Geneva Smitherman's extraordinary work with oral traditions in African American communities posits an eternally relevant question: Upon whom is the onus to change placed when unequal power positions are identified? This work represents a long-winded answer to that question—which has implications for researchers in the overlapping fields of literacy and rhetorical studies.

The primary literacy crisis I'm interested in is the one white people perpetuate each time we obscure whiteness in our research. We need more inquiry into the coded ways that whiteness and white supremacy are sustained through the language practices in our own writing. By that same standard, we need more ethnographic accounts that illustrate the ways in which white people attempt to un-learn. Though we run the risk of reification, it's better to look inward—towards the creation of whiteness—than to move beyond the concept of race in such a way that reeks of post-race mythology. We need all kinds of anti-racist scholarship that serves to decolonize the field of literacy studies. Community literacy scholars can embrace the dialectics I've suggested as a way to productively implicate themselves in the structural racism too often veiled by logics and language of liberalism. Adichie put it well in her article titled "Now is the time to talk about what we are actually talking about" (2016):

> Now is the time to discard that carefulness that too closely resembles a lack of conviction. The election is not a 'simple racism story,' because no racism story is ever a 'simple' racism story, in which grinning evil people wearing white burn

crosses in yards. A racism story is complicated, but it is still a racism story, and it is worth parsing. Now is not the time to tiptoe around historical references.

There are a number of productive places to start, for community literacy scholars interested in this critical, reflexive work. All literacy researchers surrender the notion of innocence, but white scholars in particular need to continuously try to transgress our complicity.[18] I've shown that the literacy event, as an empirical unit of analysis, too easily obscures the notion of race. Observation without the interrogation of participation too easily invites hegemonic influence.

Literacy researchers are, in some sense, all interested in the ways in how literacies shape and are shaped by broader social structures. As productive complications of the field's scope, Watkins (2015) and Brandt (2015) lay out the politics of literacy in the late-capitalist, global, increasing-digital economy. Rhetoricians are, at least in part, interested in this same tension: the reflection of and contribution to broader collective arrangements. Wetherbee (2017) argues that rhetoricians would do well to rub elbows with literacy studies. In his words: "rhetorical practice instantiates literate practice, which begets rhetorical practice, and so on" (p. 107). Overall Wetherbee argues for more overlap between literacy scholarship, more *conversation* between these scholars.

Wible (2016) staged a similar argument in RSQ, arguing that the personal examination of literacy practices has intellectual value to rhetorical education.[19] Underscoring the social nature of literacy, Wible writes that understanding literacy this way can be appropriated for rhetorical education. He goes on to argue that immersion in "the cultural contexts that give meaning to a community's daily activities, cultural

[18] See Mahiri (1994) and Lensmire (2017).
[19] See also Mortensen (2012).

narratives, and social worldviews" is far richer than immersion in words and grammars (p. 371). While I agree on the whole, I would caution that the cultural immersion Wible identifies is too weak to stand up against the ideological mechanisms we should be enthusiastically working to dismantle.

Lankshear and McLaren (1993) point out that cultural literacy, "Serves as a medium for regrouping or further immersing those who are objectively disadvantaged economically, socially, and politically in a view of the world that leads them to accept as inevitable, and to participate actively in, the very social practices and relations that disadvantage them" (p. 18). This means that situated, cultural understandings of literacy are not adequate for rhetorical education any more than they are rhetoricians who pursue field methods.

I'd like to suggest that the rhetoricians interested in critical-participatory fieldwork would do well to consider the heuristic I've identified in chapter four. While I join the excited chorus of rhetoricians closely following this field-based resurgence, it's important to remember that fieldwork is not a research method—it is not a quick-and-dirty complement to textual analysis. Participation-observation, on the other hand, is a research method, one that I would like to make a series of suggestions about. Participation-observation, in my view, is a way of being that requires sustained dedication. The term *participation-observation* communicates a dialectic exchange between speaking and listening, witnessing and creating. Based on my experience with this project, I want to suggest that *observation* of literacy events—as isolated categories and occasions to which one can bear witness—can only be worthwhile if it is done so as an invested *participant*. Sustained, authentic engagement with the ever-evolving nature of

participant-observation is what, in my view, affords one the opportunity to create equitable change. Long-term investment is required, it seems, to truly contribute to the projects of liberation and emancipation. Critical reflexivity and long-term dedication with this dialectic is required. Recognizing our limitations and divesting our privilege takes time. Only if researchers can embrace slow literacies and slow methods—multiple rhetorics and assemblages of events—can we equitably recognize opportunities to create change.

Wible (2016) asks, "How specifically do we see literacy and rhetorical practice relating to performance of citizenship, and how do these assumptions inform our curriculum and pedagogy?" I would urge the broader field of composition-rhetoricians to consider such a question. Farmer (2013) writes that compositionists should pay more attention to counterpublics in composition classrooms. He writes that through the consideration of resistant or oppositional discourses, students stand to learn about the viable route(s) toward mature participation as citizens in a democracy. This project represents my engagement with counterpublic discourse, so in part, I agree with Farmer. I'd like to suggest, however, that instructors of writing listen to the resistances and oppositions of our students. Instructors have to engage, with enthusiasm, the role of the listener as we engage the role of the listener—particularly to those we might be inadvertently oppressing: our students. Based on my participation-observation experience, I want to suggest that composition instructors consider the ways in which *we our own problem*. Instructors of writing must deconstruct the practices of control and dominance we instantiate in classrooms. We can ask our students to participation in the

conversation about how best to do that.[20] Overall, this project documents a series of meaning-making events which implicated me as a participant in the fields of literacy and rhetorical studies. The written and rhetorical practices of community-led resistance movements represent sites of inquiry for community literacy scholarship and beyond, so long as we participate reflexively and sustainably. By engaging the dialectic of participation-observation in the public sphere, scholars can move toward transformative justice and emancipation.

Coda

The 2019 Call for Papers for the Conference on College Composition and Communication, written by Vershawn Ashanti Young, prompted contentious debate among Rhetoric-Compositionists. Some questioned the CFP's "extensive use of African American Vernacular English" while others praised the CFP as a performance to which we should bear witness. I want to suggest, after completing this dissertation, that scholars stand to learn a great deal by considering our performances, not only those which seek to reify a professional gathering, but those which constitute our more personal domains. Looking with a local resistance might make the dominant, white supremacist codes performed to varied, consequential degrees a little more visible and a little less dominant if we choose to productively implicate ourselves in the struggle for power.

[20] Inoue (2015) and Janks (2013) offer productive places to start, as does a forthcoming collection from Tom Do and Karen Rowan titled *Racing Translingualism in Composition: Toward a Race-Conscious Translingualism.*

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